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# Ephesus: Duty and Devotion

## Revelation 2:1-7

*Pastor Russ Kennedy*

The church at Ephesus is now about 40 years old. They had received the book of Ephesians, where Paul taught for 3 years. The Apostle John and Timothy both pastored here. This church's elders were summoned to Paul to hear strong encouragement and exhortations. Sadly, what Paul predicted came about. The history of the church is a history of decline: doctrine to dissension to division.

Each of these letters has its distinctives that set it apart from the others and the book as a whole. Yet, each is timeless in its insight into the way churches are. What strikes me with great force is that the greatest danger to these churches, and ours as well, is not from direct attacks by the enemy, but from decline and decay from the inside. The church is more susceptible to cancer and tumors than to viruses and diseases.

Thus, the Lord of the church moves among His people to encourage them in their strengths, to expose them in their weaknesses and to explain to them what recovery as a church will mean and what victory as individuals within the church will accomplish.

### **The Characteristics of Christ**

**(v.1)**

The attributes given here are bridge to chapter one. The very one who is the great and glorious expression of the Godhead, who redeemed, rules and rewards His own speaks to the church at Ephesus.

<sup>1</sup> "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.

#### **One Who holds the seven stars in His right hand**

What does it mean that the messengers (pastors, representatives) of the churches are held in God's right hand?

In the Psalms, we are saved by God's right hand and upheld by it. We run to God's right hand for safety and find there pleasures forevermore. God's right hand then is a place of salvation, sustaining, safety and joy. The emphasis is on the One who. May we as God's shepherds find pardon, protection, power and pleasure in the Lord Jesus Christ, who loves us and holds us securely in His omnipotent right hand.

#### **One Who walks among the lamp stands**

What does it mean that the Lord of the church walks among the lamp stands?

All through the Old Testament, lamps were used as physical reminders of the light of the presence of God. In the tabernacle and in the Temple, the seven branched menorah stood in the place of worship where fellowship took place. In that part of the Temple stood the table with the loaves of bread on it and the alter of incense. The emphasis here then is on the very

Presence of Christ in midst of His churches. We are not being evaluated from a distance. He is here among us.

Here is what HE SAYS. When all is said and done, when we have done all we can to be fully Biblical in all our ministry as a church, the only evaluation which really matters is that of Christ. In a day where we are very image conscious, the Lord of the church, with blazing eyes, penetrates the haze and fog of our posturing and sees the realities, the true contours of our Christianity as a people and as a church.

## The Commendation of the Church

(v.2-3)

The commendations that accompany medals awarded to soldiers for bravery or outstanding feats beyond the call of duty are words that often give us little of the scene of those acts. Words usually cannot give us the sharp acidity of cordite, the buzzing whine of bullets, the smell of rotting jungle and putrid flesh, the agonizing cries of the wounded, the roaring hammering of our hearts and choking cloud of our own fear. But men and women press forward, endure and finish the tasks that duty calls them to.

<sup>2</sup> "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. <sup>3</sup> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

Just such a commendation adorns the medals to this church. Jesus has seen her work, her toils, and her endurance. He has perceived her passion for truth, as she cannot bear evil men and false apostles. This church has stood faithful motivated and empowered by a concern for the fame and cause of Christ. She has pressed forward unwearyingly and unswervingly in the tasks that duty called her to.

O, that we would have such a commendation. Would to God that we were known to Christ for our commitment to *doctrine*, our faithfulness to *duty*, our consistency in *discipline*, and our perseverance and patient endurance in the face of *difficulty*. This is the reality of Christian living. We need a wartime mentality in the application of our resources and strengths and sacrifices to the evangelizing of the lost in our neighborhoods and among the nations and in our edifying and equipping of the saints.

What would this church look like? It would be:

A *serving* church - A church that God commends is one who *works*. It must be serving. A church that is not working has not understood what faith is really about. Sadly, too many see church as a spectator sport.

A *sacrificial* church - The word *toil* points to labor until exhaustion. It means that we are willing to pour out our lives for God in His kingdom.

A *steadfast* church - When trials came, we hold true to the course. We seek to be a church marked by enduring and patient labor over the long haul toward greater ends.

A *separated* church - We will not tolerate false doctrine and false deeds. We will test the claims to truth and authority for ourselves. We understand that error is like Ebola virus: it is virulent, dangerous, communicable and deadly to the soul. It is telling that we evangelicals hardly use the word and are falling prey to wolves on every hand.

A *suffering* church – We will patiently bear our burdens and toil without fainting. They, like us, may not have yet had persecution, but they had plenty of opposition and pressure. I am impressed by their unwearied labor.

To you for whom doctrine is relatively unimportant, for whom duty and disciplines are outmoded and unnecessary, who succumb to the seducing fancies of error and evil, who faint at the prospect of the long haul and the pressures of it all—hear this word of exhortation. Be warned. The Lord Jesus Christ knows. He sees with piercing perception who and what you really are.

To you whose commitment to truth, whose faithfulness in duty, whose firmness in opposition to evil and error, whose perseverance and patient endurance in the face of stress, pressure and difficulty often seems to go unnoticed and unrewarded—hear this word of encouragement. Press on. The Lord Jesus Christ knows. He sees with piercing perception what really is going on.

## The Charge Against the Church

(v.4)

Here is what is really going on; here is the terrible indictment, the awful accusation against us. He has this against us. What could God possibly have against so faithful a church? Such a hard working, separated, sacrificing church?

<sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

### What does this mean? What is this *first love* forsaken?

It may refer to the way things were in our love to God when we *first* came to Him. We have failed to maintain, in the growing and maturing of our love, its honeymoon excitement and commitment. Thus, what we have forsaken is love for God in its first sweetness and power.

It may refer to the *first place* love ought to occupy in our hearts and minds. Loving God with all our beings and our neighbors as we do love ourselves is Christianity. Faith working by love is the fullest expression of godliness. Paul says that it is all that matters. Thus, what we have forsaken is the first place love for God must have and replaced with labor for God.

It may refer to the *first one loved*. It is not that we have stopped loving in the way we did at first, or that love is not an important priority, *we have just stopped loving God*. It is the object of our first love who has been forsaken. In fact, this last insight captures the other two as well. When we have forsaken our first love, we have ceased to treasure God as our greatest object of affection and have turned Him into an object of slavish service. We substitute duty for devotion, rather than laboring out of love.

### How can we flesh this out?

John Piper helps us with this poignant illustration. Imagine that it is your anniversary, or Valentine's Day. You stop by the store and pick up a large bouquet of cut flowers (maybe they are even roses). You arrive at the door. Your wife greets you with genuine surprise and pleasure. And you say, "O, it was no trouble. After all, it is my duty." In that moment, your very labor has reached out with a cold, loveless hand and chilled your wife's heart.

Think of Christ, the most desirable spouse one can imagine. One who has sought us and has given His word of engagement. The ring of the Holy Spirit has been placed on the finger of our hearts. We have given our betrothal. But time goes on. Distance separates. The blur of daily work distracts us. The lure of present pleasures draw us. Though we are still inviting others to the wedding and preparing the church and making our dress, we have lost sight of

our precious groom. The heart has gone out of it. Though we are going to stick it out, the coming wedding and our union with Christ simply no longer stirs us as they ought.

Think of how many marriages end up like this. What was once a close relationship of sharing and caring has turned into dull routine. There is no time set aside for one another. Little effort to talk. Marriage has become the routine of work, home and play. O, we're going to stick it out. We know that we ought to be together. So you make the most of it without putting much into it. This sometimes almost precisely describes some of our relationships with Christ.

### **How is it possible?**

How can a church or a people who have been recognized and commended as this church has have fallen this far? The reasons are in the first part of the remedy. We do not remember the fervency and passion of our youthful love to Christ. It was that very desire to please Him that got us involved in the labors and tasks and trails to begin with. Our delight in Him brought real satisfaction in our duties for Him. The eyes of our souls were steadily fixed on Him even as we worked. Soon, we were too busy doing just to be doing. The delight had turned to dust.

We forget that all relationships have to be cultivated and watered and pruned until the sunshine of God's blessing and roots cast deep into the soil of the Word of God bears a harvest of a deep and abiding love. So while we are working at our duties for the King, we had better be working on our devotion to the King.

For many, this happens because we think that love for God expressed in wonder and passion and pursuit is only for those with a certain personality type. Yet, I find that Moses and Daniel and Isaiah and Paul and John were quite different and yet all burned to see, to know and to commune with God. Jonathan Edwards stands as one of the great examples of towering intellect and soaring passion all applied with humble grace to experiencing a ever growing love for God.

What happens when we do this? When we forsake one love, we always transfer it to another. If we stop loving our spouses, we have started loving someone else. We have transferred the power and pleasure of our affections to another. Some begin to love the flickering image on a screen or glossy photo in a magazine. Some pant helplessly in the coils of lusting after someone who is not theirs. But frankly, many transfer their love to themselves. It is their own selfishness and self-centeredness and self-love that draws them. They have fallen in love with the image in a mirror.

It is like this in our love for Christ as well. If we have left our first love, then we have given it to another. The fleeting illusions of pleasure, the grasping hands of profit, the poisoning air of power all become heart pursuits. On and on the list goes. I do not well know what has received the deposit of the treasure of your heart, but I know what attractively ruinous investments mine tends to make.

What are we to learn from this? There are some powerful lessons that grip me as I reflect on this text.

It is possible to serve, sacrifice and suffer for the sake of Christ all without loving Him. But it is not possible to love Him without serving, sacrificing and suffering. Pity the man or woman who, professing Christ, has neither labor nor love to satisfy.

“Labor is no substitute for love; neither is purity for passion. The church must have both if it is to be pleasing to the Lord.” Wiersbe Christ acknowledges our service for Him. But Christ desires our love to go out to Him.

I have to give attention to my love for Christ: to inform it by truth, to fan its flame in worship, to send it heavenward in prayer and praise, in singing. I have to keep making deposits of heart treasures in heaven so that my affections will go out to Him. I must be ever vigilant in the performance of my duty, in the exercise of my disciplines, in the sharpening of my doctrine to evidences of a waning devotion to Christ.

What do we do when we discover this to be true of ourselves?

## The Correction of the Church

(v.5)

Here is one of the very few places in the Bible where concrete steps of action for cure and recovery are outlined. Sometimes, its very simplicity stumbles us.

<sup>5</sup> Remember 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

### Remember

We have to look back and recognize how far we have fallen. And it is a great fall. To serve in loveless labor for the sake of Christ is a soul crushing plunge from the heights of Zion to the garbage pits.

But I am convinced, that even some of you, do not think so. You are convinced that if you just believe the right things and do the right things, this is all that God requests. You well know there is little affection for Christ. Your hearts are hard, like stone. May we bring to God tender hearts willing to long and yearn and hunger for God Himself.

Here is the first step. It is a vital step. Without it you are simply doing another task of loveless labor. Remember how far you fallen.

### Repent

The word here means that we are to have a change of *our whole inner being*. It begins with a change in our thinking. You must begin to think that it is necessary and vital that you love God with your whole being. You moves to our wills, our choices. We set ourselves, in all the Biblically given ways to reach out to God. We begin to think about Him, talk to Him, read His Word and then live in love in our world. When we have, in a sense, pointed the spout of our faith and will towards God, the fountain of affection and devotion will rise up.

To you who claim a feeling of love without the works that go with them, I say this. Which would your spouse rather have: you say you love and do loving things for them. The Biblical answer is, “BOTH”. To say that we love God and not do what He commands is self-deceiving. Faith (seeing with our understanding the reality of Biblical truth and God’s promises) works (labors with hard toil and long discipline) by love (giving myself by submitting and sacrificing).

Loved ones, we simply need to repent. We need to repent of our loveless lives towards God and our loveless deeds toward one another.

## Return

What deeds is He talking about here? I am convinced that these are the foundational disciplines of the Christian life. In our over reaction to legalism, we have spurned the regular Bible reading, praying, reflecting and serving that is the fuel of the fire of our devotion. You well know that if you treated your spouse now like you treated her when you were dating and first married, your marriage would be very different. Stir up your affections and devotion to Christ in the midst of your labors for Him by spending time with him. If you are too busy, you are simply too busy.

## Remove

These are important words. They tell us that a church who continues on in loveless yet commendatory labor *will have its place and power as a church removed*. There is this awful *or else*. How terrible it would be to be committed to *doctrine*, to be faithful in *duty*, to be consistent in *discipline*, and to persevere and patiently endure in the face of *difficulty* and have God's blessing on our church removed. But it is a very real possibility. And on a personal basis, probably some hearing these words are living out that reality.

## The Concession to the Church

(v.6)

<sup>6</sup> Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Now why mention this here? Is this truly something to be recognized for? Listen to the tone of this: "You have labored long and well, enduring with patience. You know how to work for My sake. But you have forsaken your first love. Yet, I'll give you credit for this. You sure hate the things I hate." Reflect on this with me.

There are some things we ought to hate. God hates sin and error and falsehood and deceit. How many of you would cuddle up with an AIDS ridden blood soaked teddy bear? God says that He hates the deeds (v.6) and the doctrine (v.15) of these Nicolaitans. Though we do not know how this error and evil appears in our churches today, a great deal of error and evil does.

God has no problem using names to point to error and evil. We might be squeamish about it. But the Lord wasn't and neither was Paul. After all, we do know about the Judiazers, Demetrius the silversmith, Demas the traitor and a host of others, including these Nicolaitans.

You do not love me as you ought, but at least you hate as you ought.

## The Challenge to the Church

(v.7)

<sup>7</sup> He 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.'

What a challenge is given here. If you have spiritual ears, you will hear the voice of the Spirit *in this Book*. Here is what He is saying and it is a promise.

This promise is to individuals. Turning a church's labor into love is always done at the individual level. It is people who labor. It is people who forsake their love for Christ. It is people who remember, repent and return.

This promise is to overcomers. Now they are not a special class of super spiritual people. These are all of the truly saved who come out victorious because of the sustaining and preserving work of the Spirit.

The promise is a picture of the loveliness, delight and intimacy which believers will have with Christ. It reminds us most vividly of what was lost in the fall to remind us of how far a falling our forsaking of first loves is. We will partake of life in the glorious presence of God. We will drink deeply from all the eternal pleasures and satisfying joys that make up the Paradise of eternity.

May we with eyes of faith see these promises from afar, treasure and embrace them and send the deep fountains of our love for God springing out of obedient hearts to God.

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## **Reflect and Respond**

O, we are doing quite well aren't we? We are laboring for Christ. We are a serving, sacrificing, steadfast, separated and suffering people. We believe we would be commended for our commitment to doctrine, our faithfulness in our duties, our consistency in our discipline, and our patient endurance in difficulty.

But we have forsaken our first love. We have duty without devotion, purity without passion, labor without love. For many of you, the beating heart and soaring passion of your walk with God is gone. What, O what will we do?

May we remember from what we have fallen ...

    May we repent of our lovelessness ...

        May we return to do what love prompts ...

Before we lose our position and power as a true church of God.

## Notes