

Returning to Our First Love

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[0 : 00] I want us to think for, as we begin, picture Jesus observing our church. As you think about Him observing our church, think of two things.

He looks at each one of us as individuals. He looks at you, evaluating you, your life. He also looks at us as a church family, together.

A body called Pickens First Baptist. Now as you think about the Lord observing you, looking at our church collectively, do you think of the Lord more like a policeman?

A policeman who is on a stakeout. Watching criminals. Do you think of Him as watching to see when you do something wrong, so that He can turn on His blue light, pull you over, and deal with you as a criminal?

Is that how you see the Lord as you think about Him evaluating you? Some kind of celestial policeman just waiting for you to do something wrong so He can punish you.

[1 : 27] Or, do you think of Jesus more like being a gardener? Do you think about Him observing us as a gardener walks around the garden He has planted?

Think about Jesus as a gardener. He walks around and observes all the things in His garden. And if you did that, you enjoy the variety of colors.

You take note of plants that are healthy and growing. You take note of those that are producing fruit.

When Jesus, as a gardener, is looking through His garden, looking at our lives, He does notice problems.

He notices insects eating away at the plants. He notices leaves that are shriveling up. He does notice our sins, our failures.

[2 : 33] He knows that there's things in our life that's got to be dealt with. Just like in a garden, if the garden's going to be healthy.

Now, which one do you, just as you think about the Lord observing your life, is He more like a gardener? Or is He more like the policeman? I hope it is obvious the way I presented that, that we should think of Jesus as a gardener, as He observes our lives, as He observes your life on a daily basis, and our church family, as we function together as one body.

That's how we need to see Jesus in the book of Revelation, the first two chapters, as Jesus observes the seven churches of Asia Minor. He evaluates their strengths and weaknesses.

Now, we're not going to do a series. We did a series years ago on this. Today, I want to look at what Jesus said to the first church in Revelation chapter 2.

And I want you to go ahead and turn to that because we're not going to put the whole section.

There's seven verses there. And I want us to read them out of the Bible. But as you're turning, over the past several months, we've been looking at some of the hot-button issues that we're having to deal with today in our country.

[4 : 00] We've looked at the issues relating to race and law enforcement, socialism, moral issues related to this year's election. All those kind of things are important.

We didn't spend from July till recently on all that because it didn't really matter. It's important how we think, how we understand things, how we interpret what's going on.

Those issues were important for every Christian to grasp. But it's vitally important that we look at those issues from a biblical perspective. That's why I call that series Thinking Biblically.

Thinking Biblically. Now, as important as those issues are, they must never become the priority of our lives as individuals or as a church.

And what I want us to do this morning is look at Revelation chapter 2 to help us turn our focus to what must be the priority of our lives.

[5 : 10] Knowing, loving, and serving Jesus and with an emphasis this morning on doing what we do as Christians from a motivation of loving Jesus.

Look with me at Revelation chapter 2. We're going to begin in verse 1. Keep in mind the book of Revelation is highly symbolic. You see that from the first chapter.

We're going to see that as we begin this. 2-1 of Revelation. 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.

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.

I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

[6 : 21] I want you to just stop for a moment. How the Lord commends these faithful Christians. They're pleasing him in many ways.

Verse 4. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 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. Yet, this you have.

You hate the work of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. The first thing I want us to notice in verse 1, the Lord has the right to evaluate us.

The Lord Jesus has every right to evaluate you and me, the way we're living, the way we live as people who call ourselves Christ people, Christians.

[7 : 22] The Lord's relationship with the church is pictured in verse 1. It says he holds the seven stars in his hands. Now, the seven stars are identified in chapter 1, verse 20.

All the symbols in Revelation are not identified. That's what makes it such a difficult book. Well, the stars were identified in 1.20 as the angels or messengers of the seven churches.

Each of the seven letters, there's seven letters to seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, and each one is addressed to the angel or can be translated messenger of the church.

Here's the problem. Who are the angels? Who are these messengers? Well, there may be literal angels. There may be guardian angels or angels who represent the church before the Lord in heaven.

And a lot of commentators say that's who it's talking about. But on the other hand, it may be human messengers. Maybe the pastors or leaders of the church.

[8 : 23] And that would make sense since the leader of the church would be the one reading this letter to the church. But we really don't know.

One of the reasons Jesus uses the symbol of holding these stars in His hand, of course, the church belongs to Him. That's why He holds them in His hand. But one of the things I want you to think about, Jesus protects the church.

He owns the church. We belong to Him. He has bought us with His life. But being in His hand is designed to be a comforting thought. It's a hand of protection if we're persecuted.

It's a hand of comfort when we're discouraged or when we're grieving. But it's also a hand of correction when we sin. But the hand of correction is a hand of loving correction in the Bible.

God disciplines His children because He loves us. Hebrews tells us in great detail there in chapter 12. Now, note one more thing just to get technical issues out of the way here at the beginning.

[9 : 32] It says He walks among the seven golden lampstands. Well, back in chapter 1, verse 20 of Revelation, it describes these seven or the golden lampstands. They represent the churches.

He walks among the seven golden lampstands. He walks among the churches is what He's talking about. Jesus walks among the churches is the point here.

He knows what's going on in the life of this church. He knows what's going on in every individual who makes up this church.

So that's why we can think about this this morning is the Lord has a right to evaluate us. We belong to Him. He's evaluating us. I want you to look next.

He commends what is right in our lives. Note, there are several things that He commends. I paused after verse 3 when I was reading it. Let's look at some of these quickly.

[10 : 29] The Lord commends good works. It says in the first part of verse 2, I know your works, your toll, and your patient endurance. This church was evidently actively involved in various kinds of ministries.

These people took their church commitment seriously. They took their relationship to the Lord seriously. They didn't just show up every now and then for a worship service. They were involved. They were plugged in. They were doing things. Some of them probably, like we've seen today, people leading out, maybe singing. People have taken a lot of time in putting these shoeboxes together and coordinating this effort.

All kinds of things go on that you see on Sunday. Lots of things go on that you don't see behind the scenes that happens during the week. The Lord is commending those who are serving faithfully. What I want you to see is you can please the Lord. Some people have a warped sense of God that He can never be pleased, that He's always out to get us.

[11 : 35] He's always looking for what's wrong so He can punish us. That's not the concept of God in Scripture. God is a holy God. He certainly has holy standards.

God takes it seriously when we violate them. The ultimate punishment is death and hell. But the love of God is such that He sent Jesus into this world to die on the cross as our substitute and actually pay the penalty for our sins.

So that, think of it this way, He actually suffered as He hung on the cross, the wrath of God, separation from God. That's why He cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He took the punishment we deserved so that we wouldn't have to.

And when we will admit our sin, repent of it, and trust Jesus, we become one with Him by faith and the penalty for our sin has been paid for through the death of Jesus.

As God's children, we can please Him. There are numerous passages in the Bible that talks about pleasing God, how to please God.

[12 : 49] And Jesus is saying, there's members of this church, they're actively involved using the gifts and talents and abilities they have, and He commends them.

I want you to know, the Lord commends you for your faithful service to Him, to other people in and through this church.

Look next, the Lord commends sound doctrine, the last part of verse 2, the rest of verse 2, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and found to be false.

And then in verse 6, after He condemns them for their forsaking their first love, as we'll see in a moment, He comes back before He ends this letter to commend them, yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

This church was not like some liberal churches today that have exchanged biblical truth for social action. There are some churches that never mention the gospel.

[13 : 59] There are churches throughout this country, they never focus on the actual teaching of God's Word concerning any issue.

They're more, they're more like just a social agency than they are a church. Well, this church at Ephesus that Jesus is commending, they were doctrinally sound in addition to being involved in practical ministry.

No doubt they helped people in need in Ephesus that they knew and were aware of. No doubt they were involved in what some people would refer to as social ministries, but that's not who they were defined as.

They were the people of God who truly believed in the Word of God being right and true and without error. They worked at maintaining their faithfulness to the teaching of God's Word and one of the ways, they were careful about who they allowed to teach in their church.

They had been visited by some false teachers. There was in that day false teachers showed up, we're the real deal, but they were wicked men and false apostles, the Scripture says here.

[15 : 21] This church evaluated them by what they had been taught, by things they knew of the Old Testament and by the teaching of the Apostle Paul who founded this church, who spent a lot of time in this church teaching them.

The Apostle John, the writer of Revelation, he was a powerful influence in the church at Ephesus. Timothy, Paul's understudy, Paul's disciple, Paul left him in Ephesus to teach in this church.

This church was solid theologically. They knew the truth. They could hear the people talking, preaching, and they could evaluate it by what they knew was right and wrong. And when they found a false teacher, they kicked him out. They weren't worried about hurting someone's feelings. They did not allow anything that would be contrary to the clear truth of God's Word to happen, to find root in their midst.

They were zealous for the truth. They hated what was contrary to the truth. Now this helps us. This helps us understand that we individually as Christians, we need to be discerning as we listen to people teach like me here right now.

[16:52] Your Sunday school teachers, what you hear anywhere, what you read anywhere. You need to be discerning. You need to evaluate what you hear in light of what the Bible clearly teaches.

Whoever teaches what is contrary to the truth of Scripture is a false teacher. I don't care if they're in a church, if they're on TV, if they've got a website, or whatever.

And that includes people who ignore the Scripture or take it out of context to present their messages of positive feeling and feel good living.

living. Like, say, Joel Osteen. Joel Osteen wouldn't last 30 seconds in the church at Ephesus because he's shallow as a cookie sheet, because he does not truly teach the Word of God in its entirety or even in a little bit.

Today, serious-minded Christians look for resources to help them better understand the Bible. I know a lot of you do because we have some conversations from time to time.

[18:09] I want to encourage you, when you run across a book or a website and you're not familiar with the author especially, it applies to anybody, take what they say and evaluate it by what you know is true about God's Word.

And if they are distorting it, ignoring it, contradicting it, throw the book away. Never go back to that website. Don't allow someone who is not doctrinally sound, who is not faithful to the Scripture to have any kind of influence in the way that you think and the way that you live.

The Lord commends sound doctrine. And then third, the Lord commends faithful endurance. Look at verse 3. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake and you have not grown weary.

They were living under a time of real persecution, most likely under the Roman Emperor Domitian. They also experienced local oppositions from pagan religious leaders.

You can read about that in Acts 19. It had been going on for years. But they remained faithful. In spite of the hardship, some of them no doubt would have been arrested.

[19:20] They would have had church members killed. They would have people who lost their jobs because of what they believed in that community. We cannot compare ourselves with them because we don't face that kind of intense persecution for our faith.

At least we don't yet in this country and we need to thank God for that. But we do face situations where we get under stress, where we're tempted, maybe not to compromise our faith, but we're tempted maybe to just sort of ignore the Lord.

How do you deal with difficulty in your life? How do you deal with stress? Do you let those kind of things draw you closer to the Lord, drive you deeper into His Word, or do you just retreat from Him, ignore Him?

You don't really deny the faith, it's just, Lord, like you forget the faith. We, where we live, right now, in our own personal difficulties, in our own times of stress, we've got to focus on being faithful, living faithful Christian lives, maintaining, even growing in our relationship with the Lord, no matter what's happening to us or around us.

The church at Ephesus had a lot going for it. It was filled with Christians who truly were serious about their relationship with the Lord in many ways, but there was something missing.

[20:57] There was something that made a difference in their relationship with the Lord that was missing. Let's look at that next. The Lord condemns what is wrong in their lives.

They lacked one thing. Look at verse 4. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Now, Jesus doesn't explain what that love was, but it should be obvious.

It had to be their love for Him, their love for God. The greatest commandment, Jesus said, is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Now, think about it. This is what we would call a good church. The Lord commends them for their good works, their dedication to the faith, the defense of the faith.

They didn't give in to persecution. But somewhere along the way in all this good, their love for the Lord had grown cold.

[22 : 00] Maybe they lost sight of why they were doing what they were doing, or who they were doing it for. Perhaps their zeal for the truth of God's Word turned into an academic, or just an intellectual exercise.

Maybe they believed right. They defended the truth. Maybe they just went too far and actually just hated and wanted to really hurt those who were false teachers.

They lost their love, their first love. Now, these were not rebels. I want you to know that. I think the church at Ephesus, it was a good church.

A lot of good things going on. You couldn't criticize them for their statement of faith or anything. But somewhere along the line, it took place over time.

Not everyone in the church for sure, but as a whole, they sort of drifted away from their close, personal relationship with the Lord.

[23 : 13] They drifted away from a true, do what we do because we love Jesus. We want to please Him. We want to bring a smile to His face.

I think the best way to illustrate this, the best way, what most common way, is what happened in this church is similar to what happens sometimes in a marriage.

Do you remember the first time you started getting serious about the person you're married to right now? Do you remember what it was like when you first got married?

You remember how you wanted to be together all the time? I mean, you couldn't get enough of each other. When you were apart, you actually missed one another. Some of you are of an age and a time frame that you wrote love letters when you were apart.

And some of you right now at home, you've got put away, maybe can't even find them right now, a few or maybe a stack of love letters that your spouse wrote to you.

[24 : 20] Now, if you've got love letters of somebody before your spouse, you better throw them away before you get in trouble. Don't save everything. There's people in this room that you spent time on the phone, maybe even hours when you all were apart, just chit-chatting, talking about everything under the sun.

Nothing really serious. You just wanted to hear each other's voice. Do you remember when you were truly in love, close?

You did special things for your spouse? Cooked a special meal? Gave her a special gift? Took getaway weekends because you wanted to be alone and together with each other?

Do you remember when you used to look at your spouse and actually carry on a conversation about something other than your children?

And you actually listened to your spouse because your love was such you cared. You wanted to know. You wanted to share.

[25 : 44] That's how most of us are, at least at the beginning. Hopefully it never changes, but let's be real. After you're married for a while, things do change. Life happens.

We get in a routine. You have to get in a routine. Children come along and take a lot of time, a lot of attention. Work, as you go on in life, and especially if you get serious about your work, it takes a lot of time.

And with work and being involved in church and being involved with your children, there's all kinds of activities. And you know life is just stressful.

More so at times than others, but life is stressful. If we're not careful, we can live life in such a way that we'll wake up one morning and we never intended it, but we'll wake up one morning and we're married to a stranger because we've drifted apart.

We have not intentionally, and we may not want to admit it, we still love our spouse, but not like we used to. The warmth is no longer there.

[26 : 56] There's a familiar old story that sums this up. Most of you have heard it, but I want to say it anyway because it just sums it up. An older couple was riding down the road one day.

The wife was sitting, you know, on the far right of her side of the car up next to her door. Her husband, far left, sitting behind the wheel driving. The wife said, honey, do you remember when we used to sit close together and you'd drive with one arm around me and one arm on the steering

wheel?

That was before seatbelts. Before they started enforcing that, people like me and some of these guys in here, you stuck those seatbelts down under the seat where they couldn't even be seen. And when you were dating, especially when you got serious, you wanted the girl to sit right beside you. How many of you guys, don't raise your hand, how many of you guys ever been asked, does it take two people to drive that car?

You know what I'm talking about. Well, the wife asked him, why don't we do that anymore? The wife said, you remember we used to do that? He said, uh-huh. The wife said, why don't we do that anymore?

[28 : 10] And the husband looked at her and replied, well, don't look at me. I ain't moved. You've heard that story. Here's the point.

If there's any separation between you and the Lord, understand, Jesus has not moved. What would Jesus say about you right now?

What would he say about us as a church right now? Have we moved away from him? Has our love grown cold or at least nowhere near the warmth it used to have?

The only thing you can do is look at yourself. Have you drifted away from him? Is the love for him zealous?

Is it truly operational in your life right now? If the Lord's showing you that you've moved away from him, listen to what he says next in verse five.

[29 : 18] The Lord warns us to correct what is wrong. He says, remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. How do you make changes? It's real simple here.

Number one, remember. Remember what it was like when you first came to the Lord or remember what it was like when you were really serious about your relationship with him. About just knowing him and loving him and serving him because you loved him.

Remember what that was like. Number two, repent. If you've fallen away, come back. Change your mind. Do an about face. Change your direction. Turn from whatever has led you or caused you to drift away from him.

You've got to identify it. If it's your work, if it's just laziness, if it's some other person, if it's just hobbies, ask him to help you to understand what it is and repent.

Change your mind. Turn from it and then return. Return to doing what you did when you did love him. Return to spending time with him, uninterrupted time in prayer and in his word.

[30 : 27] Return to a time when your love for the Lord was real. And it made a difference in how you lived.

I want to add here, this is the key to correcting a lack of love in your marriage. For some of you, this is the message. Remember how it used to be?

Remember how you once kept the fire going? If it's not that way anymore, repent. Turn from being so selfish, being so involved in everything but your spouse's life.

One error that some couples make, never let your children take the place of your spouse as the number one person in your life. Your children are important. Love them.

Invest in them. Give yourself to them. But don't ever let them take the place of your spouse.

Remember, repent, and return to doing the things you used to do to rekindle that love with your spouse.

[31 : 38] But know what will happen if we don't respond in our relationship with the Lord. Verse five, if not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. He's talking about he's going to dissolve the church.

This church will cease to be, or let's put it this way, it'll cease to be the Lord's church. It'll cease to be a vibrant church. They may meet, but the Lord won't be with them.

We've got to avoid this at all costs. We as a church, we must always keep our focus on Jesus. Our focus is not on shoeboxes.

Our focus is not on the preacher. Our focus is not on the music. Our focus is not even on the Bible. Our focus has got to be on Jesus Christ and God our Father.

We do what we do because we know Him and love Him and we want to please Him. It's that simple. And then when we do that, the shoeboxes can be a real ministry.

[32 : 40] Music can be a real ministry. Preaching and teaching God's Word can be a real ministry. Look at the final word from the Lord this morning. The Lord promises blessings to those who overcome their lack of love.

Verse 7, to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God. Listen to the Lord's promise. To eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God. He's talking about eternal life in heaven. This is a promise of final, eternal victory for those who truly love the Lord. You may not think too much about the end of your life, especially if you're young, but I've found the older you get the more you do think about that.

It's coming. Where are you going to spend eternity? This is a promise that those who truly have a relationship with Jesus, a love relationship with Him, are going to spend eternity with Him. and He expresses this symbolically here, eating of the tree of life in paradise. But I want you to listen to the opposite. Those who do not love Him will not share in this promise because they don't belong to Christ.

[33 : 54] You see, love is the essential, essential characteristic of God's people. If you went into your kitchen this afternoon and followed a recipe where you mixed together butter, shortening, eggs, milk, flour, salt, cocoa, and vanilla, placed it in a cake pan, baked it for one hour and 15 minutes, it would come out of the oven looking and smelling like a chocolate pound cake that you couldn't wait to eat.

But when you took your first bite, you would immediately realize it was missing one ingredient, sugar. Even though it had all the other ingredients and looked and smelled like a chocolate pound cake, it wasn't.

It wouldn't be. Sometimes one ingredient makes all the difference. And when it comes to living the Christian life, love is that one essential, key ingredient.

To paraphrase Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, if you don't have love, you have nothing. Let's go home with this thought.

The most important thing I can ever do is love the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. And let my love for Him be the motivation for everything I do for Him.

[35 : 28] Let's pray together. Father, we are busy people. So much is going on in life today for most families.

Many of the things we're involved in, we know You want us to be. They're good. They're right. They're important. But some are very essential. We as a church father, for the last several months, we've been focusing on important biblical matters relevant to what's going on around about us in today's American culture.

But Lord, help us in the midst of studying good things and doing good things. Help us, dear God, to not allow our love for You, our love for Jesus, to grow cold.

Father, so work in us right now to rekindle this love if it's not hot. Work, Father, to call that man or woman or boy or girl to faith in Jesus if they don't understand what this love is all about.

And help us, dear God, as individual Christians, as the church, to do everything we do for a motivation of love for You and even love for people.

[37 : 06] help us, Father, to be strong in our faith and do good works and be doctrinally sound.

Help us, Lord, in the coming days when persecution comes to hang in there and be faithful. But help us, Father, in the midst of it all to love and begin with You in Jesus.

Lord, show us how we need to respond. And now, with heads bowed and eyes closed, let's respond to the Lord as He speaks. Do what you know you need to do to leave here as a Christian motivated by love or to leave here as a new Christian trusting in Jesus.

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