

A WORD TO THE DISTRACTED

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

In Matt. 24, as Jesus spoke with his disciples regarding the last days and the signs of the end of the age, he made this interesting prediction, "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (Mt. 24:12-13) Near the end of the first century as the risen Lord spoke to his people in the churches of Asia, that coolness of love and spirit of which he spoke was already becoming evident. We see it in our text today, in the church in Ephesus. We see it in the church in our country today. And, unfortunately, if we are honest, I think we see it in our own hearts. I know I do.

Before we get into the message in our passage today, let us look at some background regarding these churches in general, and the city and church of Ephesus in particular.

Show map of the cities of Asia – the area that is now Turkey.

Ephesus – a city on the coast of Asia Minor – it was noted for two particular structures. One was the temple of the goddess Diana (Artemis). It is known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The other was one of the largest theatres in the ancient world. It was built in a large semicircle with 66 rows of seats, which accommodated approximately 25,000 people.

The early history of the church in Ephesus is found in Acts 18-20. It was founded under the ministry of Paul, with the help of a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, with some help and teaching as well by an eloquent preacher named Apollos.

There was a considerable amount of occult practice and spirit worship in Ephesus. In Acts 19 we have the account of the Sons of Sceva, who were overpowered by evil spirits. After a number of people had come to faith in Christ, there was a huge public burning of scrolls filled with information on magic and sorcery. Then of course there was the

riot in Ephesus over the effect that Christianity was having on the silversmith business – *go through that briefly.*

With this background in mind let us go to the message of the risen Lord to this church in Ephesus. This message comes about 40 years after Paul had first visited this city. Let's look at the text and see what the message is for us as well as for the Ephesian believers.

I. Identification

The recipient of this message is the angel of the church at Ephesus. In other words, the messenger – probably the overseer, pastor, head elder of the church. However it was a message for the whole church.

In v. 2 we have the sender's description of himself. (*Note the common descriptions used in these messages – they generally refer to some element of John's description in ch. 1*) The sender of the message describes himself here as "him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:" It is a beautiful thought that Christ, who said in His great commission to the apostles, "I will be with you always" is pictured here as moving in the midst of the church.

It ought to be an encouragement to us as we read this message that in spite of failures and drifting on our part, the Lord Jesus has not withdrawn his presence from us and that He still holds within His hand the leaders and the elders of the church.

II. The Good News

As the Lord begins His message to the church at Ephesus, he starts out with some very kind statements of commendation. In fact, these are the kind of words we all like to hear from those who are over us in authority. There is no question that this was a dedicated church, a church committed to hard work and to Christian service. In so many ways they were following very closely the commands of the Lord and the Apostles with regard to serving Christ.

I would like to read you a number of commands in Scripture.

"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised." (Hebrews 10:36 ESV)

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1 ESV)

"Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 2:3 ESV)

"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9 ESV)

Now listen to what the Lord says to this church. Read v. 2-3.

It sounds like this church has got it right. They are getting top marks for all of these things. They were diligent; they were ambitious; they were hard-working; they were discerning; and they were faithfully persevering.

Isn't that the kind of report card we would like to have? Isn't that the kind of thing that we would like to have Christ say to the Clive Christian Fellowship if he were writing a letter to us?

That was the good news. Now we come to...

III. The Bad News

In spite of all of the strengths of this church, Jesus Christ had something against them. It is just one small line in the text, yet it says so much. "You have forsaken your first love." They were busy, enduring, discerning and diligent, but they were also distracted and empty. Their passion had been lost. It seems that the work they were doing for the Lord had become nothing more than form and obligation.

How quickly our work for God can become hollow and empty when passion for Jesus Christ is replaced by obligation. How easy it is to come to the point where we do things out of a sense of need or personal guilt, rather than because of love and desire.

In our human relationships, I'm sure we have all seen, and perhaps even experienced the tragic results of a love that has grown cold. Interest and intimacy give way to shallow and superficial conversation. Romance is replaced by routine. Life becomes boring and monotonous.

We go through the motions, accepting the monotony as the best we can hope for. Every relationship, when faced by that loss of passion and love, suffers. And that is precisely what had happened in the church at Ephesus. Passion had been replaced by obligation. Love had cooled off and then grown cold.

Let me ask you a very pointed question, a question I have asked myself this past week. Is it possible that this has happened in your relationship with Jesus Christ? Is there anything that has caused your love relationship with Him to cool? It is frightening to think that what was once a vital, vibrant union with Christ may have become distant, empty, cold, and impersonal. Yet it happens. And when it does, it affects everything we do for Him as well.

So what is the solution? Is there an answer to this dilemma?

IV. The Answer

In v. 5 there is a three-step process to getting back to that living, vital relationship with the risen Christ.

- Remember – look back to what you used to have;
- Repent – turn away from things that have cooled your heart;
- Return – to the things you did at the first.

Do you remember what it was like when you first became a Christian? Do you remember the passion you felt, the desire to read His Word, to talk about your new-found faith? Do you remember how excited you felt about your relationship with the risen Lord, who was now the Lord of your life?

Jesus says here, Repent, go back, do the things you used to do to show your love for me.

Quote: A. W. Tozer – *"The Root of the Righteous"*

"A good way to avoid the snare of empty religious activity is to appear before God every once in a while with our Bibles open to the 13th chapter of First Corinthians. This passage, though rated one of the most beautiful in the Bible, is also one of the severest to be found in Sacred Writ. The apostle takes the highest religious service and consigns it to futility unless it is motivated by love. Lacking love, prophets, teachers, orators, philanthropists, and martyrs are sent away without reward."

V. The Consequences

There are two possible consequences given here in these verses, depending on the response. First, there is the negative. What a tragic result for those who drift away and do not come back. Verse 5b – note the disastrous result for this church if they do not respond to the warning – *read it*. I will remove your lampstand. Your light-bearing capacity will be reduced, and ultimately your light will be snuffed out. Refer to Matt. 5:16.

The other possible consequence is in v. 7 – It is a promise from the risen Lord. – *read it*. To those who hear and respond and overcome there is eternal life.

Mention briefly v. 6 – we will talk about the Nicolaitans later on when we look at the church Pergamum.

Conclusion

Isaiah 29:13 – “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’”

How tragic it would be if the Lord should say that of us. Yet how easy it is to let our love grow cold. The church at Ephesus was once growing and alive, filled with passion and love for the Lord, but as a church, she had grown cold and indifferent, even though she was still doing and saying all the right things. If it can happen there, so it can happen in our church and in our own lives.

I wonder how the Lord Jesus would address our church if he were writing a letter to us. Even more important, what would He say to you? Has your love grown cold? Have you lost the passion you once had for Jesus? Is your relationship all that it should be?