

“Abandoned Love”

Revelation 2:1-7

Today we will consider Love. To think about true love is to think about God. God is love. The Gospel of Mark instructs us to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. God’s word also instructs us to love others, even our enemies. Life is full of relationships that should operate in love. Sadly, most of us can bring to mind a marriage we’ve witnessed that existed without love. The marriage may have looked normal on the outside. They slept in the same bed, went to church, and raised kids, but it was not the same as when they were newlyweds, it lacked an enduring love. Additionally, there are homes where kids are raised without love. Homes that provided food, shelter, clothing, rules, and maybe even church life, but it lacked love. Some of us have even experienced churches that lacked love. Churches with nice programs, good doctrine, and community service. Possibly a church that even endured some persecution for the name of Christ. But, deep in the culture of the church, there was not a genuine and abiding love for God, and in turn a lack of love for others. What was missing was a love based on grace and truth, a love shaped by God’s love for us. I suspect, there may have been a love for community, a love for orthodoxy, a love for being right, and a love for feeling important or useful. Sadly, all these examples of relationships have hurt a lot of people and do not represent the Lord Jesus.

The Scottish theologian William Barclay said, [“The worst things are always the corruption of the best.”](#)

Satan wants to destroy God’s best in society; marriage - a picture of Christ and the church, parent-child relationships – a picture of God being our Heavenly Father, and the Church- a reality of Christ living His life in and through His people. If Satan can corrupt these God ordained relationships, he has succeeded.

The heart of today’s message is God’s serious concern for any of His churches to continue without love. To keep God’s light and life in the church, we must maintain an abiding love for Jesus. Study of today’s passage will show God’s commitment to the church right in verse one, [“Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.”](#) It is my understanding that the stars and the lampstands both represent the seven churches. I also believe that the seven churches in Asia symbolically represent the entire church. The Lord Jesus holds the seven stars. The word hold in Greek, reveals that Jesus does not hold these stars like I am holding this pulpit, but He holds them completely. Jesus holds the whole of the church within His right hand, the hand of honor and acceptance. Not only does He hold the churches, but in His love, He chooses to walk among them. He shows His interest and His affection by these two actions of holding them and walking among them.

II The book of Revelation clearly reveals Jesus walking among the churches with purpose. We must not miss this; Jesus opens verse two with “I know”. This word *know*, means to see with the eyes, to perceive using the senses, and to discern. The same word is used in Matt. 6:8; [“your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”](#) By God’s grace we are known, known in such a way that He understands both our physical needs and spiritual. In His love He desires to watch over us. In His love He took the time to write us. Maybe He didn’t write to you personally, but in writing to the

seven churches He is certainly writing to the individuals who make up the churches both then and now.

III So what did Jesus observe while walking with the Ephesian church? He has a list of commendations. Jesus knew their works. The first time I read verses 2 and 3 I was thinking, “Man, these people were serious believers!” They toiled, which means worked till exhaustion. They endured difficulties and difficult people with patience, they would not put up with evil. They were zealous to discern and expose wolves that came into the church claiming to be Apostles. Jesus then commends them a second time for enduring persecution patiently for the name of Christ. The trials must have lasted long enough to wear them out, because He commends them for not growing weary. The Metropolis of Ephesus was a difficult place to be a Christian. Persecution from worshipers of Diana, from the Romans, the Jews, and false apostles. At this point in the text, this is a church I would gladly join!

Let’s look at how scriptural these works were for the Ephesian church. Toil – Paul *toiled* for the gospel in Col. 1, *love* is patient in 1 Cor. 13, *endurance* produces character in Rom 5:4, we are told to detest evil in Rom. 12:9, we’re instructed to test spirits in 1 John 4:1, we’re warned we will suffer for His name’s sake in Luke 21, and we are encouraged to not grow Weary in Gal 6:9. That is incredible. These Ephesians seemed to really be living out their faith! When I see Jesus listing off their works, I think of this verse in Hebrews 6:10 [For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for His name in serving the saints, as you still do.](#) Heb. 6:10 sure seems to be true, at least mostly true for the church at Ephesus.

IV The award ceremony ends abruptly; Verse 4 begins with But. “[But I have this against you, that you have left the love you had at first](#)”, or in many versions, “[you left your first love.](#)” Remember, the author is the resurrected Jesus. His eyes are described as flames of fire... His discerning and all-knowing eyes are on these believers, and He has this one thing against them! Picture this church listening to this corrective message for the first time, humbled, and confused. They would have had so many questions, questions like; [Well, what about our good works? Surely this is just a mild correction, right? And what is this about abandoned love? Every work you just listed shows our commitment!](#)

He goes on in verse 5 to intensify this accusation, informing them they had seriously fallen. Apparently, they didn’t know they had fallen, they thought their current type of love was good enough. They had erred so badly in the wrong direction that Jesus tells them twice to repent. They need to turn away from a secondary love and back toward their first love. Jesus then adds an additional command telling them to return also to the first works. For any Ephesians still thinking this is just a spiritual tune up, Jesus then gives them a scary warning. Without repentance, I will come to you and remove your lampstand. This would have put the fear of God in them. A removal of the lampstand is to remove the source of light from amongst an assembly of believers. For that group of professing believers, it would have been Christ rejecting the Ephesian church as one of His. This removal would have also caused them to lose their title and witness to the community as a Spirit filled church of Christ. A church without the presence and power of Christ is just an empty shell.

John Stott’s quote on this matter is excellent, “[But the church’s light is as borrowed as the moons. If the stars are to shine and the lamps are to burn, they must remain in Christ’s hand and in Christ’s presence.](#)”

You see, abandoning their first love was so harmful to the testimony of Christ that Christ would have to remove his light so that his remaining churches would continue to be truly set apart. History is full of examples of once active and spirit filled churches permanently closing. Some remained open only to reveal a lifeless religion. Humans are predictable. Predictably clueless when pride creeps in. clueless to see their harmful self-confidence and independence. Without an abiding love for Jesus, all our works are no better than the world's. There are plenty of examples of ungodly people who toiled for a cause, who were patient, who endured terrible suffering, who hated evil, and those who tested imposters. Even those who did things in the name of Christ, yet they did not know him. Jesus, our merciful savior, our shepherd, sees our error, sees our return to dead works and confronts us. Warns us to repent. Warns His children, so that they would stay close to Him. This message to Ephesus can sound judgmental and harsh, but we must remember love moved Him to write. Love moved Him to warn. Love moved Him to ask for repentance. Jesus loves His church, and He wants to continue to walk in her midst. He wants a spotless bride to continue to reflect His light. Now, Sanctification can require rebuke and discipline. Stan talked about so many people in our generation that think of Jesus as their best friend, a buddy who is there to help them get what they want. While Jesus does call us friends, His plan is to have friends that stay close and are completely set apart for Him.

Two verses in Heb. 12 are great examples of His corrective love. Heb. 12:6 **“For the Lord disciplines the one He loves and chastises every son whom He receives.”** And Heb. 12:10 **“For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.** Jesus Christ disciplines His people out of love, desiring them to share in His holiness. He warns them, not to condemn them, but for them to stay close to Him, the source of light. Jesus does not want His bride to go on representing Him without love. He does not want to empower dead works and empty religion. I say dead works because the works they had done so far were obviously not what He was looking for. Those works look good but without a first love they are void of eternal value. Dead works were a serious concern for the early church. Look at these examples in the book of Hebrews. Heb. 6:1 **Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,”** and Heb. 9:14 **“how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”**

And here we have an example of the important connection between love and good works. Heb. 10:24 **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”** This is what I believe the first works were. Good works stirred up by the Holy Spirit which had their foundation built on a love for Jesus. That abiding first love. They would have included the works listed in verses 2 and 3, but also included verse 6.

Hating what Jesus hates is also commendable. Now, the Nicolaitans are a bit of a mystery. Some scholars believe they were heretical followers of Nicolas of Antioch and others believe it is a symbolic name looking at the meaning of Nicolas, which is conqueror of the people. We do know from verse 15 in the message to Pergamum they encouraged idolatry and sexual immorality. In this message to Ephesus, Jesus could have just said quit your dead works or said your works are of no value to me. He doesn't. He commends them but they have to continue in works based on a close and abiding love of Jesus. Without it their works have no eternal value. Let's look more at first love. The book of revelation does not tell us exactly what it was, just that it was essential. As I searched scripture for

clues, I came to Jeremiah 2:1-3 [The word of the LORD came to me, saying, ²“Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. ³ Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest.](#) Looking at this passage, I would submit to you first love is that type of love that has youthful devotion, an energy and passion that newlyweds possess. A fresh willingness to follow someone closely into the unknowns of life. A relationship that is set apart from all others. A committed relationship that produces valuable fruit as in the exciting first fruit of a harvest. What else can we learn in Scripture about first love? In Phil. 1:9-11 we see Paul’s prayer that explains more. [And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.](#)

This prayer reveals the will of God for the church. Their love, their first love must grow, it must overflow more and more. This is not just a gush of emotion and sentimentalism! This is a loyal love that is closely connected to the source of love, Jesus. A love that is based on knowledge and discernment. It is a committed love knowing what He has done for us. A love that is discerning is a love that is enduring. I see first love as a love that grows contagiously, it is connected to truth, it is pure and without blame and bears the fruit of righteousness and is only possible through Jesus Christ. Can you see that in the text?

This is what I fondly call Gospel love. For many of us, when we first had our spiritual eyes opened to who Jesus is and what he has done for us, our only response was a humble love. A heart full of gratitude that Jesus saved us while we were sinners. Our love at first was based on a knowledge that it was our wickedness that nailed Jesus to the cross. It was based on knowledge that the Holy Spirit was given to us to make us new and to give us discernment on how to live grace filled lives. Gospel love keeps us in that place of remembering who we were without Christ, who we are in Christ, and the only works we ought to do should be a product of the Spirit living in us. We are shown in Gal. 3:3 that we began our faith in the Spirit, and we would be fools to think we could continue in the flesh. If we forget who we were when He saved us, we start to think we are better than we are and that we can do things in our own strength, the flesh. Unknowingly we start doing religious activities without a close relationship with Christ. First love is an abiding love. The word abide - which means to remain or endure, appears ten times in the Gospel of John. One of the most impactful verses in the Gospel of John is [John 15:9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.](#) The same type of love that our heavenly Father has for His son Jesus, is the same love Jesus has for us. We are told to remain, to abide in this love. This verse stirs me to worship and awe. It causes me to love Him more. In the words of John in 1 John 4:19 [We love because He first loved us.](#) I would say this points to the source of first love.

The last point I want to make about first love has to do with the preeminence of Christ, that Christ is in first place in all things forever. Col. 1:18 [And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.](#) Preeminence means to be first or to hold first place. There should be no other love in our lives that competes for that first-place position. If our love for Jesus comes first, all other relationships will experience God’s love through us.

VI The close of this message to Ephesus in verse 7 is very dynamic. Throughout the first three chapters of Revelation, there is a sense of corporate responsibility, the responsibility of the group. Jesus narrows the focus here at the close, [He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.](#) Anyone in Ephesus, or even one of you here today could think, “this message is to the

church and not to me personally". "Besides, I think I am doing ok and my parents, or my spouse, or my friends, and church leaders seem to be maintaining the first love for the whole church." This is riding the shirttails of others. You are getting pulled along by their faith. Jesus is asking once again; do *you* have an ear to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church today? He wrote to the churches because He cares for the individuals that make up the church. The truth we hear must be applied to ourselves first.

Jesus continues to narrow His focus stating, "To the one who conquers." Every person in Ephesus, and everyone here today should be asking yourself, will I conquer? This is one of the most important questions you can ask yourself because eternity is at stake. If you conquer, Jesus Himself will grant you to be in paradise and to eat of the tree of life. Paradise refers to the new heaven where the tree of life will be. Revelation 21 and 22 show the details of this future dwelling place for the entire church. The use of the word paradise takes us back to Genesis chapter 2 where Eden is referred to as paradise, a place where the tree of life was, and the first Adam. God is taking us to a new paradise, the New Jerusalem where there is no sickness, death, or pain and there will be no sunlight because Jesus, the second Adam, will be the light. Romans 8:37 tells us we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. And in 1 John 5:4-5 the same Greek word is used for overcome as for conquer. [For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?](#) Are you born of God? Is your faith in Him alone? Is He your first love?

For some of us, we may be realizing we have abandoned our first love and today should be a day of repentance. There may be others that need to experience God's love for the first time, today is the day of salvation. If that is you, I want to encourage you to talk to someone and ask for prayer if you are not sure you are at peace with God.