

(The Lord and His Church) 4. the Loveless Church

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon emphasizes the importance of maintaining fervent love for God and one another to avoid becoming a loveless church, while also addressing the dangers of Nicolaitanism and the call to repentance and overcoming faithfulness.

Scripture: Revelation 2:1

Topics: "First Love", "Repentance"

Description

Zac Poonen addresses the church in Ephesus, highlighting their commendable deeds and perseverance but rebuking them for having left their first love for Christ and one another. He emphasizes that true devotion to God must be the foundation of all actions, warning that without love, even good works become meaningless. Poonen calls for repentance and a return to the fervent love that characterized their early faith, stressing that the Lord desires heartfelt devotion over mere ritual. He also warns against Nicolaitanism, which seeks to dominate and control believers, urging the church to maintain purity in both doctrine and love. Ultimately, he encourages believers to be overcomers, promising the reward of partaking in the divine nature for those who remain faithful.

Transcript

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, The One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place - unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.'"

(Revelation 2:1-7).

The Lord's Evaluation

Although these seven letters are addressed primarily to the messengers of the churches, yet at the end of each message, we find an invitation to anyone who has an ear to hear, to pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is saying to ALL the churches. They have a message therefore for every disciple in every church in every generation.

We saw in Chapter One that our Lord is described as the Faithful Witness. We see Him fulfilling this ministry in these letters of His. To use a modern expression, Jesus "tells it like it is". Christ is the Judge in the midst of His church, judging both the messenger and the church itself. He tells the messengers and the churches exactly what He thinks of them.

In His evaluations, the Lord doesn't "touch-up" the portraits like modern photographers do. He loves His people far too much to do that!! He knows that it is better that we deal with sin, worldliness, lukewarmness and self-centredness right now, than to have to face up with these things at His judgment-seat later. To be judged for these over there would not be profitable for us; and He has our eternal good in view. So it is good for us to pay careful attention to everything that the Lord says in these letters.

Where there is room for appreciation, the Lord expresses sincere appreciation. And where there is need for rebuke, He does not hesitate to rebuke scathingly. Cancer cannot be washed away with soap and water. It cannot be removed gently either. It has to be excised by radical surgery. Even so with sin.

Appreciation Before Rebuke

In the letter to the messenger at Ephesus, the Lord describes Himself as the One Who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven churches (verse 1).

The Lord is always walking in the midst of the churches, examining everything that is said and done by everyone therein, and especially by the messengers Whom He holds in His hand. And He measures everything, not by the low standards that carnal Christians have, or even by the standard of the ten commandments, but by the plumbline of Divine righteousness.

He expresses His approval and appreciation first before He points out the failures (verse 2). The Divine nature is like that. The Lord always looks for that which is good first, and expresses appreciation for that, before pointing out what needs to be set right.

Man's nature however is quite different. He does not look for that which is good in others first, but for that which is bad. Man is naturally slow to appreciate and extremely quick to criticise. This is but one mark of the poison of the "Accuser of the brethren" that is in our system (Revelation 12:11). The more we partake of the Divine nature however, the more we will be like our Lord - quick to appreciate and slow to criticise.

It is good to follow this principle all through life: "I will never point out a fault to someone, in whom I have found nothing so far to appreciate".

Following that simple rule can lead us to greater heights of godliness than we have ever imagined. It will make us a far greater blessing in the church and far less of a nuisance to others than we have been thus far.

It is only when we appreciate others that we have laid the foundation to constructively criticize them. Otherwise we will only be hurling bricks at them. You cannot write with a chalk on thin air. You need a blackboard if people are to see what you are writing. Even so, expressed appreciation forms the

blackboard on which we can write and "speak the truth in love" to others. Then, what we say is also more likely to be accepted by them.

Appreciation and rebuke are both signs of love. But we must begin with appreciation first. Notice how Paul follows this principle even when writing to the carnal Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 1:4-10).

The Lord commends the messenger at Ephesus for his toil and perseverance and for his efforts to keep the church pure from evil men. No doubt he had fought a battle against worldliness to keep it from entering the church. Not only that, he had also striven to keep the church pure in doctrine. He had tested those who claimed to be apostles and had proved their claims to be false.

The Lord's reference to "apostles" in verse 2 clearly indicates that there were other apostles in the church in the first century, besides the eleven whom the Lord had appointed when He was on earth. Christ has given apostles to the church even after He "ascended on high" (Ephesians 4:11), and there are apostles even today. But there are also many who claim to be apostles who are not. And so we must not be deceived by false apostles (verse 2).

The messenger in the church at Ephesus had also "endured" for the sake of the Lord's Name without giving up (verse 3). What a wonderful man this messenger was, according to the standards of most believers. And what a wonderful church the Ephesian church appeared to be - one that toiled, persevered, kept away evil men, kept out false doctrine and exposed deceivers - thus emphasising both purity of life and purity of doctrine.

You Have Left Your First Love

One would have thought that such a church had everything that the Lord wanted to find in a church. But alas it was not so. It lacked the main thing that the Lord looked for. It had left its first love - love for the Lord and love for one another (verse 4).

What the Lord said to them was essentially this:

"In the midst of all your zeal and your activity, you have lost sight of ME. You have lost that fervent devotion that you once had for Me. You have kept yourself from evil and you have steered clear of doctrinal error. But remember how you loved Me fervently when you were first converted and how you did everything out of love for Me then. Now everything has degenerated into a dry routine. You're still going to the meetings, reading your Bible and praying. But it has all become a ritual."

The church here had become like a wife who once served her husband joyfully out of love for him, but who now considers the same tasks a drudgery - because the fire of love has gone out of her marriage. In the olden days, she used to wait eagerly for her husband to come back from the office every evening. But now. She is still faithful to Him, but she has lost her first love.

What does a true husband desire from his wife first of all? Is it her love or her labours? Certainly, it is her love. It is the same with the Lord. He desires the love of our hearts first and foremost. When that is gone, everything that we do becomes dead works.

Good works become dead works when love for God is not the motivating force behind them.

The believers here had also lost their fervent love for each other. They were no longer able to bear with each other's weaknesses or to overlook each other's sins. They had lost their first love for one another too.

The messenger had lost his first love - and gradually the church too had become like its messenger.

This was not a small error. It was a great fall - for the Lord says, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen." We usually think of a believer as having fallen only when he falls into adultery or theft or smoking etc. When we become sensitive to the voice of the Spirit however, we will recognise that even a slight loss of devotion to the Lord and a slight cooling off in love for others is also evidence of backsliding.

From where had the church in Ephesus fallen?

Ephesus was the place where some 40 years earlier the apostle Paul had come and established a church. There was such a revival there at that time that the whole city had known about it (Acts 19). Here was a church where Paul had laboured for three years, preaching DAILY with tears (Acts 20:31). When finally he left Ephesus, he called the elders of the church and warned them of some of the dangers that the church would face after his departure (Acts 20:17-35).

Four years later, Paul wrote a letter to them - a letter containing some of the deepest truths of the new covenant found in the entire Bible. He could write to them about such matters because he considered the church at Ephesus to be the most mature and most spiritually-minded of all the churches that he had established. We also notice from the letter that Paul had found nothing to rebuke or correct in them. Such was the high position that they had occupied at one time.

Paul's letter could be called the first letter to the Ephesians. Here in Revelation 2, we see the second letter to the Ephesians. The story is entirely different now. A new generation had arisen in the church and they did not have the devotion or the spirituality of their fathers.

This is the sad history of almost every church and movement in Christianity, throughout these twenty centuries. The second generation has the same doctrine, but not the same life as their fathers.

And so the Lord tells the church at Ephesus, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen".

The Need for Repentance

There was only one solution for this problem. "Repent and do the deeds you did at first", says the Lord (verse 5).

The word that we normally think of preaching to unbelievers - "REPENT" - is the word that the Lord preaches to the church. "Before you tell others to turn from their sins, turn from your own sin of leaving your first love", He tells them. They must mourn for having left their first love.

"Do the deeds you did at first", says the Lord (verse 5). If their works did not spring out of love, then all their activities had no value before Him. Their works were wood, hay and straw now, fit only for being burnt.

The motive behind each action is what gives value to the action. The motive behind your perseverance and your toil and your purity is what makes them acceptable or unacceptable to the Lord. In the day that we stand before the Lord, we shall find that the question "WHY?" will be far more important than the question "WHAT?". Why we did what we did will be the test by which the Lord evaluates all our actions.

We must never forget this.

Whatever does not spring out of love for the Lord is a dead work.

Remember, that we are commanded to repent of dead works. Hebrews 6:1 tells us that this is part of the foundation for pressing on to perfection in our lives.

If the messenger and the church do not repent, then the Lord says that He will remove their lampstand from out of its place. That means that He will no longer consider them thereafter as one of His churches on earth. They may still have their meetings and their conferences, and their numbers may keep increasing. But, as far as the Lord is concerned, they would be dead and non-existent, without the anointing of His Spirit and without His grace.

That is how serious the loss of first love can be.

The Nicolaitan Hierarchy

The Lord then commends the messenger for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans which He also hated (verse 6).

There is no reference anywhere in Scripture that tells us who the Nicolaitans were or what they did. So we cannot be certain about what deeds the Lord was referring to. However, the word "Nicolaitans" means (in Greek) "conquerors of the people".

If that was what the Lord meant, then it would be a reference to those who sought to "lord it over the flock" (1 Peter 5:3) - elders who behaved like kings and not like servants. Such elders set themselves up as a separate priestly class (as the Levites were in the Old Testament) and rule over other believers. The Lord said that He hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

Today we have Christian preachers using titles such as "Reverend" (a title that is used in Scripture for God alone - Psalm 111:9 - KJV) and "Pastor" (which is a gift and not a title or an office - Ephesians 4:11) etc., to exalt themselves over others in the church.

However, it is not just with titles that preachers seek to rule over others. There are many who call themselves just "brothers" who dominate their fellow-believers by their soul-power (dominant personality), their financial-power and their spiritual gifts.

All this is Nicolaitanism and it is nauseating to God.

In India we see the sad spectacle of multitudes of Christian churches and organisations ruled by their Western masters through money-power. Because of financial indebtedness and the obligations that have come through being invited to Western countries, many Indian believers have ended up as slaves of "the white man". Such slavish subservience of one believer to another is "Nicolaitanism" and is an abomination in God's eyes.

Consider another form of Nicolaitanism. The Roman Catholic church teaches that Mary is a mediator between Christ and man. Their priests then act as further mediators between the Roman Catholics and Mary!! But this unScriptural mediatorial attitude can be practised just as much by a Protestant pastor as by a Roman Catholic priest!

When a pastor "finds God's will" for one of his flock in matters concerning employment or marriage or whatever, he is acting as a Nicolaitan mediator. By such methods, priests and pastors gain power over their flock in a way that God detests.

To give spiritual counsel and advice is a godly thing. But to "find God's will" for another member of the body of Christ is to rob him of his connection with Christ as his Head.

Under the old covenant, there were prophets who found God's will for the people, because the Holy Spirit had not been given to individuals then. But now, under the new covenant, things are different. All can know God personally (Hebrews 8:8-12). In fact the Lord eagerly desires that every member of His church (His body) should have a direct connection with Him as Head (Colossians 2:18, 19). Nicolaitans however hinder this.

The church in Ephesus had successfully resisted Nicolaitanism. They hated it, and the Lord commended them for it because He hated it too. He hated it in the first century and He hates it still.

What about you? Do you hate this evil just as much as the Lord hates it? If not, you are unlike Christ, and you cannot be a true messenger of His. A Nicolaitan can never build the body of Christ.

The Call to the Overcomers

Finally, the Holy Spirit exhorts everyone who has an ear to hear, to hear what He is saying, for the message is for ALL the churches (verse 7). Not every believer is willing to obey what the Lord has to say - for most of them are either wanting to have their own way or wanting to please their fellowmen. Recognising this fact, the Holy Spirit proceeds to challenge individuals in the church to an overcoming life.

The Holy Spirit gives recognition here to a group of wholehearted and faithful believers whom He calls "overcomers", in the midst of a church. These are the ones who overcome sin and worldliness and who stand faithfully for the Lord in the midst of the spiritual decline around them.

In every locality, God is looking for those who will stand true to His standards and who will fight for those standards at any cost. In the letters to the seven churches, we see that the Lord is primarily interested in the overcomers. Even today, He looks for overcomers in every place. He may not find them in every church, but He looks for them in every locality.

The Lord promises a reward to those who overcome. In this case, it was the privilege of eating from the tree of life (verse 7) - the privilege that Adam missed. The tree of life is a symbol of the Divine life, the Divine nature. The greatest reward that God can ever give a human being is to partake of His nature. Here on earth, even most believers don't think too highly of this. But in the clearer light of eternity, we shall discover that this is indeed the greatest of all rewards that God can ever give a human being.

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