

Lost Love

Seven Letters Series, Part 1

Revelation 2:1-7 Dan Leeper May 17, 2015



Take your Bible and turn to Revelation 2. David Sunday asked me to preach through these two chapters, where Jesus is sending seven different messages to seven churches throughout what was then Asia Minor. In each of these messages, Jesus gave an evaluation of those churches. Over and over again, there is a description from Jesus. Then He often gave a commendation along with a rebuke: *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* There is a call for each of us to individually listen to these messages to these churches in which Jesus gave an evaluation. There is also a promise for those who overcome and conquer. In future weeks, we will look at some of the themes that carry over from the different words, messages and letters, but today I want to focus on the heart of this theme: the letter to Ephesus.

People will often ask, “How are things going at your church?” It’s kind of a small talk question. You think of something to say and ask, “How are things at work?” For me, they ask, “How are things at church?” It may be because I work here as a pastor, but I hear this frequently. I was asked that question about a week ago. I hesitated for a moment and said, “I think things are going well.” Apparently, I hesitated a little too long, because he chuckled and said, “Don’t you go there? Don’t you attend the church where you work? Don’t you know?” I hesitated not because I don’t come here or don’t know, but sometimes I overthink. What does someone mean by that question? How do you evaluate a church?

You could do the same thing when someone says, “How are you?” and you think, “Well, do you mean my finances? My health?” How would you answer this question if you couldn’t just say, “Fine”? It’s just an American greeting and most people probably don’t really care.

If you were asked by someone who wanted to have an in-depth conversation with you, how would you answer the question, “How do you think things are going at New Covenant Bible Church?” How would you evaluate us? Many people, including each of us, would evaluate things differently. We would use different criteria. Are we thinking about how many people are here? I would say attendance is good. We planted a church this year, and things are still going well here. You could also think of whether or not it’s a good church based on the absence of a major crisis. There are no major divisions, problems, fights or leadership issues. Is that what makes a good

church? Or would you evaluate the preaching, the music, how many come to a prayer meeting, how many attend a class or youth group, how welcome visitors feel, or how we do at making others feel loved and welcomed.

There are all kinds of ways to evaluate our church. We could even say, “Let’s look at the Bible and see what it says a church should be. What makes a healthy church? How are we doing there?” But even if we looked at the Bible, we could come up with different evaluation metrics. For example, is it our ability to reach out to the world outside our church? Is it our ability to articulate and know the Scriptures? Is it our life of prayer, both together and individually? There are many ways we could use to evaluate.

Some churches even have secret shoppers visit. Maybe you’ve even tried this. You can sign up and they will pay you to go to a restaurant or store as a customer and then send back your anonymous feedback. Churches will do that as well. They will have visitors come in and ask, “What do you think? What is your evaluation? From an outside perspective, how are we doing and where can we improve?”

Basically, I say all of this because there are many ways we can evaluate our church and I think it is healthy for us to do so. Jesus did just that in the messages He gave. He wrote to these churches, saying, “Here is what I think is good, and here is what I have against you. Here is what is not good.” He basically did that to all of the churches. He did not really rebuke a couple of them, and He did not say anything good about one of them. In general, though, He pointed out the good and the bad, calling us to a faithful perseverance in these last days. He calls us to simply be a church that loves Him.

Just think for a moment. If Jesus gave a specific message to New Covenant Bible Church, what would He say? What would be His evaluation of New Covenant Bible Church? If you are visiting today, you may exclude yourself. But those of you who say, “This is my church,” are a part of this. Church is not just a place we come. It is who we are. We are a family of believers here. What is the corporate description of us?

It is also good to see that there is both a corporate call to these churches, as well as individual calls. He said, “*He [individually] who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches [plural].*” So we are all called to evaluate ourselves as well.

This is the message to the church of Ephesus: “Doctrine and works that are absent or apart from love and affections are deadly. They are a deadly combination. Let’s begin reading in Revelation 2:1: “*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.*”

This description is providing us with context. In chapter one, John described Jesus in His full, glorious, resurrected, sovereign glory. We will look at some of these descriptions of Jesus in future sermons, but today I just want to focus on what He says here. This is a description of Jesus, Who is holding the seven stars, which are messengers or angels. The lampstands are the churches, and Jesus is walking among the churches. He is sovereign and with us, and here is the message He gives to the Ephesus church, beginning in verse two:

² "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. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ 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."

Jesus Christ wrote to this church in Ephesus, sending a message to them, and He began with the good. He said, "Here is what I know about you that is good and all that is commendable. I know your works and your toil." He described this people, saying, "I know that you are doing good things. You are busy. You are serving. You are doing a lot of good things." Then He went on to say, "You have patient endurance." They continued in these things. It is not just something that happened briefly. They were serving, active and continuing to do good things. He said, "Your service is patiently enduring."

He said, "*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.*" He praised them for their doctrine and understanding of the Scriptures, as well as their willingness to stand for it. They were willing to stand up against false teaching, saying, "This is not right." There were people who came and claimed to be apostles, bringing in false teaching. This was a church who knew enough of the gospel and the Scriptures to say, "We are going to stand up against what is wrong and stand for what is right." Then Jesus went on to say, "*I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.*" Their actions were right. Their doctrine was right, including their willingness to stand up for it.

This is a church that has been around for a long time. You can see the beginnings of the church in Acts 19-20. Paul wrote a letter to this church, which is in the book of Ephesians.

Timothy served as an elder in this church, and the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy were written to this church as well. It is a church that has some history, and they were warned about false teachers. This message proves they stood up against that false teaching and endured. They had been bearing up.

I think these things can describe our church. As I look around this room, many of you, if not all of you, are busy, actively serving God. Many do that in programs and things here, whether it is in the nursery, the children's ministry—on Sunday mornings or in Awana—with the adults, or in the Friendship Class. Many of you are here to help organize events, setting up beforehand or cleaning up afterwards. There are adult Bible studies that take place, both here and outside these walls. There are all kinds of things. Some things are public and people see them. You may be a greeter who welcomes people, or you may be an usher who passes things, welcomes people and helps them find seats. There are all kinds of ministries here.

But there are ministries that are not here as well, right? What happens in the programs of our church is just one part of what happens. Many of you are active in our community and with your neighbors. You are caring for people and following up with those in your Care Group, meeting their needs. You may be mowing the lawn for someone in your neighborhood or caring for others' needs there. There are all kinds of ways that we, as a church, are busy doing things and actively serving God.

To evaluate our doctrine, I think we are a church that knows God's Word. In general, many here know God's Word well. You have studied it for a long time and you know when false teaching comes in that doesn't line up with God's Word. You are even willing to stand for that. I think many of these things could describe our church, and they are good things.

Listen to what Jesus says as He goes on in verse four. It's very possible to do all these things, to know the right things, and even be active doing works, yet still not have the right motive or affection underneath it. Verse four says, "*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*" Some of your translations might simply say, "first love." The ESV has interpreted this as the love that they had at first. So they are saying it temporally. That is a possible interpretation. Others look at this and say, "No, it's first importance," like the gospel is first of all. Paul says the gospel is first of importance. Either translation points to the same theme here.

As John wrote these words of Jesus, he said that this church, Ephesus, as a whole (though not every single person), knew and did the right things, yet the love they had was gone. The love they had at first was gone, which was possibly the love they had for God when they first trusted in Him. It was when they first recognized, "I am a sinner, fully deserving God's wrath, yet Jesus

took that punishment for me. He became a Man and lived in my place perfectly. He died in my place and rose again, that I may have eternal life and will one day rise and live with Him forever. There is nothing I can do to earn that; He gives that to me as a gracious gift when I turn away from sin and trust Him. I must respond in repentance in faith, and He gives me eternal life.”

When we first realize that, we are overwhelmed with gratitude, thankfulness and love for Him and His grace. Our response to Him is therefore love. We want to know Him. We want to know His Word and what He says. We enjoy being with God’s people. We look forward to coming and sitting together to hear God’s Word preached. We long for that; we long to be with God’s people and sing together. It is not just whether or not the sermon was interesting or exciting enough, whether we learned something new, or if the worship set was interesting, exciting or different enough. It is about love we have for God Himself, not just being around God’s Word and for some of the things we create for a service. Do we love God Himself because of Who He is and because of what He’s done for us?

So He said to them, “You have left that kind of love. You abandoned it. You still know and do the right things, but there is no longer a love for Me. It has become cold; it has drifted and waned.” Or maybe He focused in on a “first importance” love. “You have abandoned the most important kind of love.” Is it love for God or love for others? I think Jesus showed that those go together. When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” He said, “Love the Lord your God.” Depending on which Gospel and which translation, He said, “With all of your might, all of your strength, and all of your soul” (Deuteronomy 6:5). In other words, we must love God with everything. That is the greatest commandment. He went on to say, “The second is just like it. It is to love your neighbor.”

Those who were with Jesus asked, “Who is my neighbor? Whom must I love like that? Who do I have to love like myself?” So Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. The point of that story was about a man who was walking down the side of the road and found a man who had been beaten. Jesus ended the story by asking, “Who was the neighbor? Who acted like a neighbor?” The second command is to love others God has brought into our lives. That includes those in this room who are in our church family, but it is not just them or even just the person who lives next door to you. It is people we walk by and those we are around whom God has placed in our lives to love as ourselves. A right kind of vertical love for God flows out. When we realize how much we’ve been loved by God, we respond to that with a love for Him and a love for others in our lives.

He said, “*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*” In other words, “You were once a people who loved Me and others. Now, you just know things

and do things, but the affections behind it are gone.” Verse five shows us what He called them to: *“Remember therefore from where you have fallen.”* Remember the kind of love for God that you had. It is the kind of love you had when you enjoyed coming to His Word, talking to Him in prayer and had desires for Him. Do you remember that?

On the Desiring God blog this week, I read an article by Marshall Segal that fits in with this passage. He talked about knowledge of God separated from love for God. Look at what Segal says:

Jesus himself says, *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money”* (Matthew 6:24; see also Hebrews 13:5). The God of Christianity and the god of money are irreconcilably opposed. They cannot room together in the human heart. If you find yourself serving money—consuming yourself with earning, gathering and spending—by definition you are not serving God.

But is money more spiritually dangerous than theology? The answer may be trickier than we think, especially within the numbing comfort of a proudly affluent and educated American Church. Money is a tangible, countable, often visible god. Theology, on the other hand—if it is cut off from truly knowing and enjoying God Himself—can be a soothing, subtle, superficially spiritual god. Both are deadly, but one lulls us into a proud, intellectual and purely cosmetic confidence and rest before God. Theology will kill you if it does not kindle a deep and abiding love for the God of the Bible, and if it does not inspire a desire for His glory, and not ultimately our own.

That phrase in there— “if it is cut off from truly knowing and enjoying God Himself” —is important. If we focus on doctrine truth that is separated from truly knowing and loving God, it is deadly. Obviously, theology is not bad. Theology is the study and knowledge of God. However, there is a way we can learn about God without loving Him. That is what He confronted here. Are we comfortable to just know and stand up for truth, yet be separated from affection?

As Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24), He gave them the example of money, specifically the god of money. There is nothing wrong with money, either, but money can tempt us toward loving, serving, and idolizing it just like anything else. Some of the most dangerous things that attack our affections for God are good things. I’m sure you could sit here and listen to this. Maybe God is using this to bring to your mind some wicked, sinful, and inherently evil things you are engaging in that are keeping you from hungering after God. However, you could also be sitting here thinking, “God, there are some very fine and neutral

things in my life right now that I know that when I participate with, engage in, or give my life to them, my affections for God dwindled.”

This is different for everybody. That’s why we can’t say, “Anyone who has money is evil.” That’s not what the Bible teaches. Nor does it teach, “Anyone who participates in this kind of entertainment is wrong.” That is not true, either. For some people, that may be helpful and good. For others, a focus on that could cause their hearts to drift away from God. So examine your heart and affections, asking, “What is it in my life that ignites, energizes and raises my love and affections for God? And what things in my life cause them to dwindle?”

Here is the call He gave to this church. Look at verse five: *“Remember therefore from where you have fallen.”* Think back on that time. Think back on times in your life when your affections for God were right, good and focused on Him. Then He says, “Repent.” So you need to turn away. If there are things in your life that He is bringing to your mind that you know you need to stop, then turn away from those things. *“Repent, and do the works you did at first,”* He said. “Turn back toward Me. Turn back toward the things that ignite affection and love for God.”

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.” He doesn’t say, “Stop learning about Me and doing good things unless you love Me.” Sometimes, Satan can give us that temptation. “Well, I know right now I am not feeling like I love God. So I should not learn about Him, serve Him or do good things, because it is worthless anyway. Until I feel better about God, I’m not going to go to His Word or serve.” Jesus did not say that here. He did not say, “Stop focusing on doctrine,” or, “Stop doing good works.” He said, “You need to examine your affections and turn.” Turn from things that are causing your heart to drift away from Him.

He also gave a warning, saying, *“If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”* The lampstand that He spoke of in verse one is the church. To the church that goes down this path—one that knows and does things but has no love—Jesus gave this warning: “I will remove you”. He will remove the church’s witness and light and possibly even end the church. As an individual, you may say, “I have no love for God and never have,” or, “I have love for God right now, but I don’t care.” If you have no repentance and continue to pursue life that way, even if you know things and do good works, your Christianity it’s true Christianity because it is separated from love for God.

Individually, He calls us to repent, saying, “This is what true believers do.” Yes, we will fall over and over again. However, when Jesus gives us this call, we are to turn back to Him. *“Repent, and do the works you did at first.”*

Look at verse six where He gave another commendation to them: *“Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”* Again, He pointed toward their decision to stand for what God loves and against what God hates.

There is also an individual call to us in verse seven which says, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* There is a sense in which this message was given corporately to the church. Yet, our response to it is as an individual. *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* Don’t just sit here and think, “There are other people in our church who need this.” Think, “How do I need this?”

As I was reading this week and preparing for this, God did a work in my own heart. It is so easy for us to plot through, continue on, endure, do good things and know good things, but let our love for God or others drift away.

He gave a promise, saying, *“To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”* This theme of conquering comes up over and over again in Revelation. He gave them a promise to look forward to. He said, “Think back to the love you had at first. Think back to the love you had when you were overwhelmed with the goodness of what Jesus has done for you, then look forward.”

I want to focus on this theme of conquering because it is going to come up in every one of these messages. I want to talk about that a little bit later, but let me just give you a hint. As He talked about conquering, He also talked about the response that He just described of humble repentance and persevering faith. We will talk about that more.

Let’s think of applications. We have already talked about some. We talked about thinking back to ways you loved God and hungered for His Word. Just ask if that affection is there right now. I don’t want to cause an over-introspection, idealizing an emotional feeling that must be constant every second of every day, thinking, “I must feel this same kind of excitement every day.” Our affections will come and go. We are physical and emotional people. Sometimes the feelings will be there; sometimes they won’t. I think you can tell the difference. Has there been a season in your life when you know, “My hunger, desire and love for God has drifted. It is just not there right now.”

Maybe you are avoiding seeking Him in His Word because you just don’t want to these days. Maybe you pray when you eat or when you are at church prayer meetings, but that is about it. There is just no desire for Him. You approach this gathering on Sundays with a critical spirit, thinking, “Was it good or bad? Did they do this right, or did they do this wrong? Did people seem nice to me or not?” You approach it that way, rather than how you can love one another and love your God. You can see areas in your life where there is a pattern of drifting. Jesus is

with you He is in your midst. He cares for you and knows you. He knows that you don't have to hide it from Him. He is calling you back to Himself.

This also relates to our conversations with others outside this church or the Church, i.e. people who don't know Jesus. If I knew you for any significant amount of time—if you lived next to me or I worked with you—and you said, “Oh, you have a wife?” And I said, “Yeah, I have a wife, but that's just kind of personal. I don't really talk about her much. I don't want to impose that on you.” You would think, “Do you love her? Do you hate her? Are you embarrassed by her?” If I truly love my wife, Holly (and I do), that's going to come up in conversations, right? Hopefully, at some point soon, I will talk about her, because I love her. I think she's great, and I think you should think she's great, too. “Let me tell you something about her.” Eventually, it is going to come out.

However, there are times when we don't act like that about God. People can know us for a long time. They may know we go to church, but do they know that we love God? Do we ever say things about how He's great and they should think He's great, too? Do we have the kind of love for God that just comes out in conversation?

On the flipside, there is a YouTube video of a magician names Penn Jillette of “Penn and Teller.” (Penn is the big one.) He did a selfie video blog where he described a situation where he was mingling with the audience after one of his shows. A guy came up to him and gave him a Bible. Penn is an outspoken Atheist, but in the blog he said, “There is a guy who came up to me who was kind and very sincere. He handed me this New Testament. He had written something in it and said, ‘Hey, I want you to know this. I want you to read this.’” As he described this situation, Penn basically said, “I don't believe in any of that, but if you do and wouldn't tell me you must really hate me.” Here are his words:

If you believe there is a heaven and a hell and that people will not be getting eternal life, and you think it's not worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward, how much do you have to hate someone to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate someone to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn't believe it, there is a certain point in which I tackle you. And this is more important than that.

He was describing these belief systems and saying, “If you believe this, then care about me enough to try to convince me.” I know not everyone shares his opinion on that; some people do wish that it would just stay private. However, if we love God and care for others, then that is going to come out. It may not be in every single conversation with someone. We may not show

love to people in everything we do in order to convince them of what we believe. It is not as if we are to say, “Okay, we’re done,” if they are not convinced right away. No, there is a genuine love. We should be known by our neighbors as people who are kind, loving, and doing things for others. Jesus said others know that we follow Him because of our love for one another. Right? But then He also said to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are called to this. This is what it means to experience the kind of love we have and believe that God died to eternally save us. We didn’t deserve it, but He did it. When we experience that kind of love for Him, it then flows out into both a love for Him and for others.

We know this, yet we drift—and we will the rest of our lives. This is a continual call. It is not just beating up this church in Ephesus, saying, “I’m done with you.” He called them to repentance and He was ready for them to come back to Him. This was a good church. Thinking of their history and the leadership they had, Ephesus had many good things about it. However, even they drifted, and we can do the same. So we are called to remember and repent and do the works we did at first.

I read a book on Revelation written by Jim Gordon, an elder in our church. Regarding his passage, Jim said every church should use these messages to evaluate themselves. Hold these up. These words from Jesus are His last words to the Church. Think about that. We often think of the Great Commission which was His last instruction here on earth (Matthew 28:19-20). However, later on, He gave these words to churches. These are His words to us, and we can evaluate ourselves by what He said to these churches. We know many things and do many good things, but has our affection and love for Him and others drifted? Let’s return to Him.

I want to close this time with our prayer of confession. We do this most Sundays as part of corporate worship. We take time to corporately confess together. In this passage Jesus calls us to repentance. If this is resonating with you, so that you are thinking, “Yes, I’m in one of those seasons of drifting right now,” then confess that and return to the Lord. If not, and you say, “Actually, right now, I love God more than anything else,” then thank Him for that and ask Him to cause that to continue in you. Let’s take some time right now to respond to this silently in confession.

Father, we confess that we are prone to wander. We can quickly push aside in our minds all that You have done for us and all that You are. We become enamored with other things. There is the busyness of life and other things that bring temporal pleasure and feelings of success and satisfaction. God, I pray right now that You would draw us back to Yourself. Cause us to repent and turn away from things in our lives—even good things—that are keeping us from You

and are causing our love for You to dwindle. God, help us bring things into our lives that encourage, motivate and ignite our love for You, so that we may hunger for, thirst for, and desire You. God, we thank You for Your forgiveness, mercy and grace. I thank You, God, for how much You love us. I pray now that, as we turn from these things, we would trust and rest in Your forgiveness. Reignite the flame in us. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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