

February 19, 2012

To love

Revelation 2:1-7

Two men were discussing the subject of love. The first one says, "I thought I was in love three times,"

"What do you mean 'Thought you were in love?'" asks the second guy. "Well, three years ago, I cared very deeply for a woman who wanted nothing to do with me," said the first.

"Wasn't that love?" asks the second. "No, that was just obsession. Then two years ago, I cared very deeply for an attractive woman who didn't understand me."

"And that wasn't love?" asks the second. "Nope, that was lust," says the first. "And just last year, I met a woman while I was on a cruise. She was gorgeous, intelligent, a great conversationalist and had a super sense of humor. Everywhere I followed her on that ship, I would get a very strange sensation in the pit of my stomach."

"Was that love?" asks the second guy. "No. That was sea sickness!"

Love is a strange thing isn't it. It's a feeling that practically defies definition. Just four little letters L O V E, that, when combined, equal one of the most powerful emotions a human being can experience. We spend the entire course of our lives giving and receiving love. We thrive on it, we revel in it, we delight in its existence. And yet there are times when we curse it, when we despise it for the pain that it leaves in its wake. Love is more than an emotion – Love is a choice.

Love has the ability to take us to the greatest highs in life – and then plunge us into the greatest depths of despair. Love brings with it the greatest joys you will ever know – but it can also bring the greatest, heart breaking sorrow that you will ever be called upon to bare.

In 1833 Alfred Lord Tennyson's best friend, a guy called Arthur Hallam, died suddenly. And his death threw Tennyson into a tormented and near suicidal state. And it was out of that pain, and out of that sorrow, and out of that depression, and out of that heartache, and out of that grief that Tennyson penned those immortal words:

'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all'.

It is said that A life lived without ever experiencing love would be a life not worth living. But it's in loving God, we might want to rethink this.

In Revelation Chapter 2 and verse 4, Jesus is writing to the church in Ephesus and he says this (hear this I have used the New Living Translation)

"Write this letter to the angel^[a] of the church in Ephesus. This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands: "I know all

the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. ³ You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.

Sounds pretty good doesn't it ... but there is more! Jesus continues in verse 4!

"But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!"

And then there comes a warning. Jesus goes on to say in verse 5,

"Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches."

I am reminded of the warning given by the writer of

Hebrews 6:4 who says, 'It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace'.

Let's be reminded that the Church at Ephesus. Ephesus was situated in what we know today as Turkey. It wasn't the capital city, but it was by far the wealthiest and the greatest city in all Asia. It was a major centre for trade, travel, culture, religion and business. The original cosmopolitan city.

The Apostle Paul paid a visit there on his 3rd missionary trip and His ministry was so successful that it practically turned the city upside-down. He established the Church in the very heart of that city, and filled with believers who were active, who were loyal, who were fervent in their faith. **Right in the heart of that city he planted a New Testament church that was vibrant and glowing and growing. A church that was alive, and the Spirit of God was active in people's lives. Jesus was at the center of everything in the lives of these believers.**

Now it is widely believed that John wrote the book of Revelation while banished on the Island of Patmos, somewhere around AD95 – so this church in Ephesus was only about 40 years old by the time John had his revelation of Jesus Christ. **And yet already the rot had begun to set in.** Let me clear, this wasn't a bad church – in fact on the outside things seemed to be going pretty

well – on the outside it looked pretty impressive. There were many good things about this fellowship. As Jesus looked at that church, He saw many positive things.

Listen to the first 3 verses again:

‘I know your deeds, your hard work & your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, & have found them false. You have persevered & have endured hardships for my name, & have not grown weary.’”

What a great description of a church? Years after they were formed, Jesus was able to look at that Church and commend them for their perseverance, in fact the Greek says ‘they were toiling to the point of exhaustion’.

These people were hard workers – they were ‘doers’. He says, **“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance”** – There were undoubtedly a lot of things going on. I am sure that there were prayer meetings, Bible studies, maybe home groups, and evangelistic events. There may have been Kids clubs, youth groups, and there was worship services **They were busy, busy, busy. And Jesus says to them ‘I know your hard work, I know your deeds, I know the things that you are doing’.**

But think on this, Do you ever get discouraged working in the church? Do you ever feel like no one seems to know or care, what you are going through? Do you feel like you are doing a lot of work and no one really appreciates what you are doing?

Listen up; Maybe Jesus says, to you; “I know about your hard work”. I can see what you are doing! I appreciate your faithful service! You think that no one cares about what you are doing... but you’re wrong...because I see what you do... I know that you faithfully teach Sunday School week in and week out... I know that you pick up rubbish around the church... I know that you are visiting and writing letters to encourage people... I know your deeds... I know your hard work... And I appreciate what you are doing for me and in my name!

This church must have been a bible believing and bible preaching church, who would stand up for the Truth.

Perhaps much of the Church today could take a leaf out of their book. I am all for working with other denominations. But I must say that sometimes we are too quick to promote the spirit of unity amongst the churches to the detriment of basic bible teaching and we open the door for many different beliefs and doctrines. But we don’t want to hurt anybody’s feelings... we want everyone to get along. And that is all good as long as in it all we do not allow false teaching to enter the church. Jesus commended the Ephesians for staying true to the faith, would he commend the church in the UK today do you think? Would he commend us?

They endured Jesus congratulates them for persevering in the face of hardship. In the face of trouble they hadn’t given up. **Ephesus was not an easy place to live. Ephesus was not the**

friendliest of places for Christianity. It was a centre for Roman imperialism and the Ephesians worshipped the goddess Diana. **Ephesus has been referred to as "the highway of martyrs."** This was a difficult place to live, it was a dangerous place to live. **And Jesus congratulates them for persevering in the face of hardship. When trouble has come their way... they haven't given up... they haven't grown weary... they haven't decided that it just isn't worth it... they have hung in there... they have remained resolute... they have kept their determination.**

And Jesus says, 'I know that it gets tough some times. I know that it isn't always easy... but I am glad that you are faithful... I'm glad that you haven't given up...'

Jesus commends them for all these good things they have going on – **This was a dynamic church, this was a dedicated church, this was a determined church. If Jesus came to Orchard today and said those kind of things about us – we'd be really pleased wouldn't we? I**

Then Jesus looks right into the depths of their very soul and he utters words which must have cut them to the core 'but I have this against you – You don't love me or each other as you did at first!'

Now to hold something against a friend or family member is a serious thing, but when the Lord of the Universe holds something against His church, it is time to tremble. Jesus is able to look beyond all the flurries of activity, beyond the outward appearance and looks straight to the heart. Despite all of their good deeds, despite all they were doing, despite their outward appearance, this church had a major problem. This church no longer loved God or each other as it once had. They were going through all the right motions but their relationships had grown stale.

What bothers me, is it's an easy trap, that anyone or any church can fall into. Many churches, many Christians are busy, doing many good things – while losing their love for Jesus. Now I don't imagine for one minute that their forsaking their first love happened in one giant step. No it was probably a slow slide. It wasn't that one day they got up and decided not to love God any more. It was a gradual thing.

For a while their love for God was so great & so infectious that people were drawn into their fellowship. The entire focus was on Jesus – and they loved to bring people into His fellowship. Then at some point – the focus changed: maybe without them even knowing it. Perhaps they got so caught up in the activities they lost sight of why and for whom. They even had a great slogan painted across the churches threshold.

This is where Jesus looks at this church, and says, **"This I have against you. You have forsaken your first love."**

Boy meets girl – fall in love

Illustration - A boy and a girl meet and they fall in love. They spend precious time together,

talking, sharing, and thinking of their hopes and their dreams. They spend quality time together over candle lit dinners, and they engage in romantic conversation with each other. They dream about how they're going to spend a life time together, and how they're going to be so happy. Their love grows, and then one day they become husband and wife. They both settle down in their careers. Then, as time goes on, they begin to have the normal stresses of life to deal with. Work demands take priority. They reason it's okay because, There are bills to pay, deadlines to meet. The house takes constant effort to keep clean and repaired. Maybe they have children who demand more and more of their parents time and attention.

Soon, there are problems with their marriage, **the slow fade leads to family feuds and arguments.** Over the course of time, all of these things begin to take their toll, until one day this couple, that were once so much in love, look at one another before they rush out the door, before the husband has shaved and showered, and before the wife has put on her makeup and dressed. The wife looks at her husband spooning in his cornflakes, and the husband looks at his wife with her hair still in a mess, and they both say silently to one another, **“You're not the person I married.”**

That's the way it happened in the church at Ephesus. They had become so busy with other things, they had become so busy doing stuff, that they had fallen out of love with Jesus. They had lost their first love. And Jesus turns to them and says, **‘I hold this against you, you no longer love me or each other as you did at first’.**

God calls us to Love. Love is the be all and end all!

Matthew 19:37-40 “Jesus said to him, **“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”**^[d] ³⁸ **This is *the* first and great commandment.** ³⁹ **And *the* second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’**^[d] ⁴⁰ **On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”**

Love... Real Love – that's the starting point of the Christian life. God is love. Our Christian life begins when we fall in love with Jesus – and then as we go along the Christian journey at some point – and this may have happened to some of you – other things become more important, other things consume your time, other things compete for your attention. It might be work related, might be family related, might even be church related – but other things keep you so busy that you no longer have time to spend in the presence of God – and you've lost your first love. Your love for him has grown cold and old. You know longer love Jesus or the other people in this fellowship as you did at first.

You see it doesn't matter how orthodox our beliefs are. It doesn't matter how good you are at persevering under trial. It doesn't even matter how good and professional our church services are. What does matter – what really matters – is whether you are still in love with Jesus Christ as you were on the day when you first found him.

So Jesus says to this church – I commend you for your work, you're working to the point of exhaustion. I commend you for your effort. I commend you for your faithfulness – all of that is

good – you're busy, busy, busy, - you've got your home groups, you've got your kids clubs, you've got your youth group, mission group, but, I have this one thing against you - **and you can almost hear the pain in his voice as he utters these words** – you have lost your first love.

You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works like you did them at first. **If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.'**

What is the lampstand? It is the church itself.

Revelation 1: 19 says quite clearly – **'The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.'**

So when Jesus says tells them that unless they repent, unless they return to loving him and loving each other as they did in the beginning, they will cease to be a church, they will cease to be his church.

I've said this before, but it bears repeating. The only thing that defines us as a church, as the body of Christ, is our love for God and our love for one another.

A loveless church is a lifeless church, and a lifeless church is a dead church. . If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. I wish I could say that Ephesus repented, but apparently they did not, for the city soon lost its influence and today is nothing more than just ruins. Church and city together have vanished. And when we loose our first love, that's all that's left, is just ruins of what once might have been. And the lamp was indeed removed.

'It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' Is it? Is it really? That cannot be true when it comes to our love for God and our love for each other.

Let's pray... this isn't you this morning or this church? However, Do you find that your love for God and for others has grown cold. Do you leave here on a Sunday and not care about the lives or the situations of those you just worshipped with... Do you find yourself so busy with 'other things' that you have no time left for God in the week?