

## Love Lost

The father who loves his child disciplines his child. He disciplines, not because he hates or despises the child, but because he loves the child. Discipline is not abuse (although many in our soft culture would disagree). Discipline is love—**true love**. That said, as we begin this Lenten series on our Lord's words to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, **it is vitally important that we remember our Lord's love for us**. He says these things, not just to those ancient Christians, but to us tonight **precisely because He loves us**. Your Lord is deeply concerned for your well-being and faith, surrounded as you are by so much pagan wickedness and so many false teachers who are constantly trying to steal the gift of faith—which is life—from you.

Tonight, just a few short days removed from Valentine's Day, it is only proper that the very first lesson focuses on **"lost love/losing our first love."** No... this has nothing to do with **"the one that got away."** This is about our love for the Alpha and Omega, the One who is the beginning and the end; the first and the last. Before we delve into this, though, let's start with a little background; a little history lesson on the congregation of Christians for whom these words were originally intended.

First off, as our Lord says, the Christians at Ephesus were a **remarkable** congregation, the **oldest and biggest** in that part of Asia. **Ephesus was the provincial capital, wealthy and populous**. Even though the Ephesian congregation had grown over the years, their journey in faith wasn't an **easy** one. By the time of this writing (95 AD), St. Paul began preaching and teaching the faith there forty years earlier. When St. Paul arrived on the scene, some of those he was preaching to were **still disciples of John the Baptist**. They had not yet heard that the Messiah, whose way the Baptist prepared, had come. **Eagerly** they heard Paul's good news. They were baptized, and the Holy Spirit filled them with His gifts.

For two difficult years Paul labored among the Ephesians. There was **strong opposition** from the synagogue, but the first Ephesian Christians honored the name of the Lord Jesus. Miracles of healing were common in those early days. There were many who **publicly repented** of sin. Even sorcerers turned from evil to Christ, burning their scrolls, which were worth thousands of dollars. In fact, so many people became Christians that the silversmiths who made statues of Artemis, goddess of Ephesus, began to lose business. Few seemed interested in visiting her temple anymore. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but if Artemis was not a real goddess, **who cared?** In fact, the silversmiths, whose livelihood was disappearing, felt so threatened that they started a riot. Paul barely escaped with his life. Those were dangerous times for Christians in Ephesus, **but they persevered**.

Eventually, after suffering persecution in Palestine, the apostle John came to live among them as pastor and bishop. Under John's shepherding they flourished. ***They became living examples of good works and faithfulness.*** That's commendable, right? Other churches without a pastor might become lazy, neglecting works of charity. They might (and often do) become morally and doctrinally lax with no one to encourage them, but not the Ephesians. ***They showed themselves to be different.*** This is why our Lord praises them. *"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary"* (Revelation 2:2–3).

Continuing with the praise, Jesus says: *"You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate"* (Revelation 3:6). ***The Nicolaitans were false Christians.*** They were very "liberal" in their "faith." These were people willing to compromise faith for money, people who taught that immorality is okay because grace covers sin. The faithful Ephesians, though, knew better than to use grace as an excuse to do wrong. Not only were they champions of Scriptural Truth, but they didn't hesitate to expose those who would mislead their brothers and sisters in the congregation.

But... there were also some issues. This only makes sense, right? After all, they were still children of Adam... ***just like us.*** The Church is full of sinful people... ***you included.*** The big problem that our Lord addresses was imperceptible to some, but it was a creeping cancer that would destroy their church if it wasn't removed.

And what was this issue? All their hard work and good deeds, their doctrinal and moral purity; it would all count for nothing without love for Christ. *"You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I [Jesus] will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place"* (Revelation 2:4–5).

A bit puzzling, isn't it? How can you praise and celebrate what is so good in the congregation (good things that many congregations don't have and don't do), ***and then proceed to threaten that God might remove your church?*** The answer is simple: Good works count for nothing without a heart that loves Christ who loves you. *"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends,"* says Jesus (John 15:13). Jesus didn't just preach those words. He embodied them on a level we'll never be able to comprehend.

With His own life's blood, He poured out His love for you and for all children of Adam. The agony of soul and body Christ endured for you in His prayer at Gethsemane, in His trials before priests and politicians, and most of all on His cross. ***Look at this cross! Look at how He loves you!*** Because of this single

act of love, you are saved. Because of His love for you—***love that put you and your salvation first***—you are declared innocent in the eyes of the Lord. Now you have been called to be part of God’s holy people.

And this wasn’t just a ***one-time, one-day kind of love*** either. Christ our Lord has loved you with an ***everlasting*** love. He has given you faith and filled you with the Holy Spirit. Respond to His love for you with your love for Him. Repent of the coldness of your hearts. As Jesus reminds us: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment*” (Matthew 22:37–38). Ask yourself: Do you honestly love God with ***ALL*** your heart, soul, and mind?

Christ’s love doesn’t just save Christians from death. It gives life to the Christian. ***His love builds and sustains the Church.*** It is central to everything (at least... it should be). Without it, there is no life, only death. There may be zeal. There may be overflowing prosperity of wealth and worldly goods. There may be a wealth of ritual and form. There may be clearly defined and fervently defended doctrines. ***But unless Christ’s love—received and given—fills that zeal and doctrine, there is only spiritual death, and the church fades away.*** Its lampstand is removed and all becomes darkness, as if Christ’s light had never shined among this people. Thank God, your lampstand is still here, still ready to shine with sacred fire, the fire of God’s love. Thank God for His merciful gift of time; time to repent and turn back to that which is of ***first and primary importance***—the love of God for us in Christ.

I’ll end by simply asking you to remember who has loved you; loved you so much that He suffered and died for you so that you could receive the free gift of everlasting life. ***Return to Him.*** Do not let the worries and cares of this world steal this love from you. Do not let your lamp grow dim and be taken away. **There is nothing more important than the love of God.** Keep the first things first, and the first and most important thing is the love of Christ. “*You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.*” “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God*” (Revelation 2:7). Life, the greatest most precious gift, ***life that never perishes***—this is God’s gift to all who receive His love in Jesus. The tree of life is not God’s gift to angels. It is for people like you, people who remember and return to and abide in Jesus, their first love.

AMEN