

“Remember the Height from which You Have Fallen” | Revelation 2:1-7

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(Discussion questions on page 10)

Introduction

Jesus addresses us, Jesus upholds us, and Jesus walks among us

Today we begin our five-week summer series on the *Letters to the Churches* in the Book of Revelation. In my view, Revelation is one of the most fascinating books in the Bible, and probably one of the most symbolically dense pieces of literature in the history of written words.

Revelation is also arguably the biblical book most prone to enticing certain types of adventurous, imaginative readers into engaging in endless interpretive rabbit trails and fanciful theories about the end of the world. They will typically spend a great deal of time telling you about their least favorite people and world figures, who are clearly the anti-Christ, and best of all they will sometimes bring end-times charts! Prepare for the wonderful world of weird in your small group discussions.

Over-interpreting the book of Revelation reminds me of Trekkies who go too deep with the lore of the show Star Trek. You have mega fans who might seek out collectibles, know all the characters. But there will always be the overly studious fan, just like there are over-imaginative readers of Revelation. In the world of Star Trek, some Trekkies have hyper-focused on a fictional alien species in the show called Klingons. In the show, they had their own language, but these fans developed an entire actual Klingon language that can be spoken and in which a person can become fluent.

- *They've published the The Klingon Dictionary (TKD) containing the grammar, vocab, and pronunciation of the Klingon language and has sold over 300,000 copies*
- They've performed entire plays by Shakespeare entirely in Klingon, including Hamlet which was performed in Klingon in a theatre in Arlington, Virginia.

- Duo Lingo offers classes in Klingon, on the site it says “Learn Klingon in just 5 minutes a day. For free.”

What we want to avoid is becoming the equivalent of Klingon Christians, where the novelty or imaginativeness of Revelation sidelines us from the main points of the narrative.

For example, across history people have had a field day with the fact that our passage today is addressed, “**to the angel of the church** in Ephesus” (Rev. 2:1a). They’ve developed entire angelologies that would make the Trekkies fluent in Klingon look tame. But while I could give a two-hour lecture on early Jewish and Christian beliefs about angels, when we read verse one in light of verse seven it becomes clear that Jesus is addressing *us*. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says **to the churches** (Rev. 7a).”

So, what is Jesus saying to the churches? It turns out to be a very practical, timeless message: in your effort to endure in Christian faithfulness and holiness, don’t lose sight of love. And so, we’ll look at Jesus’ address to the church in Ephesus in four parts this morning: a warning, a critique, a command, and finally a promise. Let’s begin with the warning, found in verse 5.

I. A Warning (Rev. 2:4-5)

A Warning against non-compliance

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.

Jesus gives us a warning, and it is a real warning. We need to be careful not to hold others to a super high standard, but then to soften the hard speech of Jesus when it is directed at us. I’ll give you an example. Many evangelicals and Bible-believing Christians hear a warning like this from Jesus, and they soften his words with the pillow of their preferred theology.

‘I’m once-saved-always saved’ they might say, “and so this really doesn’t apply to me.”

‘My theology won’t accommodate a Lord who repossesses my lampstand like a creditor repossessing a vehicle for missed payments.’

‘Once-saved-always saved.’ I have the **‘eternal lampstand security package’** with a **‘perpetual lampstand coverage clause.’**

When Jesus issues a warning to Christians, it’s not an empty threat. We shouldn’t use our theology as a set of earplugs to muffle the voice of God.

We’ve all surely seen how this plays out in parenting. It rarely turns out well for the kid, or for the parent. Recently I encountered it in a swimming pool. A little kid named Billy was wreaking havoc on the pool. “Billy, one more time.” “Billy. Billy!” “What did I say?” “1, 2, don’t make me count to three.” Meanwhile, Billy knows the drill. His old man could count to 37 and Billy still ain’t stopping anything. At this point, Billy could ride a jet ski through the pool setting off fireworks as he goes, and his dad would still say “Billy.”

Jesus doesn’t offer empty threats to the already eternally secure. This is not to say that we lack eternal assurance in the gospel. It’s not to suggest that we should view our salvation in a state of constantly shifting degrees of certainty and uncertainty. It is to say, however, that in order for God’s word to be living and active we must allow it to operate on us with all the force and authority of almighty God, not with the equivalent authority of the empty threats of Billy’s dad.

II. A Critique (Rev. 2:4-5)

A Critique against loveless endurance

We heard Jesus’ commendation to the Ephesians when the passage was read. Verses 2 and 3 speak of their patient endurance, their rejection of false apostles, and their hatred for the sexually immoral and idolatrous ways of a group called the

Nicolaitans. These are good and laudable things! Before Jesus ever critiques the Ephesians, he most certainly commends them for these things. Yet, when our orthodoxy becomes the thing that we use to define ourselves over against others, we cease to operate according to our first love.

We cannot love those for whom our primary inclination is disdain. We cannot rightly love those whose primary function is to serve as a foil so that we can form our identity around the fact that they are our antithesis. They are impure; be we are pure. They are incorrect; but we are the correct. We *hate* the sin of the Nicolaitans; but we can't find it in our hearts to also love them and long for them to be saved.

The Ephesians had done a great job at guarding the purity of the church from the Pharisees of Libertinism and licentiousness. But in the process, they had themselves become Pharisees of Fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism is the residue of Christian long-obedience lived out apart from Christian love. A call to faithfulness is not a call to fundamentalism. A call to sanctification is not a call to separatism. A call to guard the good deposit of the faith is not a call to build a subcultural Christian bunker or to build a holy wall so high that not even the purest, most correct, most compliant Christian Pharisee could ever hope to clear its height.

Just as Jesus removes the lampstands of wayward churches, he removes the lampstands of orthodox, correct, obedient but *loveless* churches and Christians.

We know, thank God, from reading the letters of the church father Ignatius of Antioch, that the Ephesian church did heed Christ's command and warning. May their orthodoxy be our orthodoxy. May their obedience be our obedience. May their love, be our love.

This brings us to our third and final point: the command of Jesus.

III. A Command (Rev. 2:4-5)

Return to your 'first love' . . . but what's that?

The call of Jesus to the Ephesians, to remember, repent, and return to their first love is not a return to religious infatuation, or to immature religious emotionalism, or self-serving spiritual nostalgia. It's not return to a "feeling" or a spiritual high that we're trying to get back.

It's not an experience at youth group, a retreat when your spiritual life was really amped up. Or, when you first became a believer, or some experience you had with God in nature. Rather, the call to return to your first love and the works you did at first, is a call to return to the radical, others-centered love that characterizes the heart and actions of every new believer.

To repent and remember is a call to return to the love we had at first is meant to grow away from self-direction and self-obsession and self-interest, to more naturally exist for the sake of loving and serving *others*..

It can be difficult for us to understand what returning to our first love might look like for us. Whenever I read this passage, my first thought is returning to the beginning of a friendship or a relationship before anyone can rightly say 'well, I guess the honeymoon is over!' The time of puppy love. notes that if you read them twenty years later don't seem romantic but juvenile and embarrassing. But those are also the seasons when emotions run highest. This person likes *me*, and they want to be *my* friend, or romantic partner, or whatever. *I* feel so lucky. *I* feel so alive. *I* can't believe this is happening to *me*.

There's nothing wrong with those times. They're wonderful! But the nostalgia or ache for that very me-centric season of deep emotion is at the heart of every marital infidelity that has ever happened.

Christ is not calling us back to the puppy love of our spiritual adolescence, he is calling us to the deepening of expansion of Christian love that happens when it stops being me-centric and starts being others-centered. **Me-centric love** views

the excitement of emotional exuberance and attention directed at the self as a commodity to seek out; **others-centered love** is less like a self-serving commodity and more like others-centered, burden-bearing cross. It delights in the spiritual good of others rather than the emotional retrieval of past spiritual nostalgia or the constant pursuit of a spiritual high. Jesus is calling us to remember, repent, and return to an *others-centered* love.

The Zero-Gravity Sky Dropper

I recall recently experiencing this on vacation with my family. We went to one of those old-school amusement parks alongside a beach. It was built in the 50s or 60s, but had great new rides, arcades, a boardwalk. Just vibey and classic and cool in every way.

While we were there, we went on a crazy ride that I don't recommend. It's called the *Zero Gravity Sky Dropper*. Zoe and I went on the first time, and I pretended to like it. 'That was great, what's next.' 'Zero Gravity, again, my daughter said.' 'There's no line,' she said 'There's a reason, I thought.' The second time I left my stomach some where high in the sky, and my sanity seemingly with it. 'Ok, let's do the bumper cars!'

Eventually, as the night wore on, my daughter went on the Sky Dropper ride, five or six more times, but I opted to sit it out.

You know, when I was a child, the idea of going to an amusement park, and watching other people ride the rides wouldn't even have crossed my mind. How boring! What rides can I go on? But I so enjoyed watching my daughter enjoy herself. Time stood still (but the ride didn't).

I was glad in my soul. Not just because I wasn't myself being slung to and fro in a carnival fury of chaos and instead enjoying the peaceful sound of other parents screaming in regret for a change. No, my gladness I found was not self-directed. It was generated from seeing my daughter enjoy herself, as if she had never been on the ride, when she was, in fact, on what seemed like her 257th go, warmed my heart. Then I started to see other families. People I didn't even know, having the

same experience. And I laughed. I smiled. I felt connected. **Strangely inclined to delight in the joy of others.** This felt like life. This felt right.

IV. A promise (Rev. 2:7)

Conclusion: Jesus wins the victory

As we begin to draw to a conclusion, I want us to focus on the last verse of our passage, Revelation 1:7,

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.

This promise of ‘overcoming’ and ‘winning the victory’ comes up again and again in the Book of Revelation.

Here in Rev. 2:7, the word of God promises that *the one who conquers* will eat of the tree of life in Paradise. The book of Revelation later goes on to say that:

- the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death (Rev. 2:11)
- the one who conquers will receive the hidden manna (Rev. 2:17)
- the one who conquers will receive authority over the nations (Rev. 2:26), and
- the one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments. His name will never be blotted out of the book of life (Rev. 3:5)

I wonder: how do you feel when you hear such promises from the Lord? On the one hand, they make me feel profoundly hopeful! The tree of life, the life-giving manna, the garments of holiness, my name in the book of life. What an encouragement in the midst of life’s seemingly endless emotional curveballs and daily disappointments! Yet, on the other hand, how often do you really feel like someone who is victorious, like a *conqueror*? The promises are great; but the bar seems so high.

And we might wonder how the Ephesians and the other early Christian communities might have felt when they received this message. After all the endurance, and all the hard work, and all the faithfulness, was the crescendo line from Jesus: “You must not only win the race; you must not only keep the faith; *you* must win the victory?”

Depending on the day, that might hit me as not only intimidating but downright *impossible*.

You’re *already* exhausted from persevering. You’re *already* running on empty from the hard work of keeping the faith. You’re on the verge of physical and emotional collapse from dodging the darts of the devil. But don’t worry all you need to do is press on and conquer!

Even when we are in top spiritual and physical form, faithfulness to Christ requires incredible resolve. It requires the resilience and exertion of our whole being. But all it takes is a simple flu, or cold, to remind us that an otherwise perfectly healthy person can go from crushing a triathlon on Monday to bed-ridden, fatigued and unable to even eat on Wednesday. O how incredibly weak and needy even the strongest of us truly are! So often the reality of the Christian life—the human life—does not feel like victory; it feels like tragedy. Feels not like victory; it feels like defeat.

One person says: I’m fighting a battle with depression, today was a bad day: *I haven’t won the victory*.

Another says: it’s my job, that’s the problem, there’s so much uncertainty: *I’m not winning the victory*.

Or, it’s my marriage, or it’s my kids, or my finances, or my faith: I feel I’m *losing* the battle. I feel that I’m weak, in retreat, in defeat.

I haven’t won the victory. I can’t win the victory. I won’t win the victory.

I've borne the burden for so long; but I can now longer hold myself up.

And then Jesus, the one who Revelation 2 says, "walks in the midst of the lampstands of the church" says to bruised, the down-trodden, the defeated, and the empty-handed:

I am the one who holds the seven stars, the church, in my hand, and I will hold you fast.

And then Jesus, speaks to us, personally, he addresses us with the words he spoke to John in his chapter 16 of his gospel:

"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; **I have overcome** the world."

And then Jesus reminds of the words his Spirit inspired Paul to write to the Corinthian church,

"[T]hanks be to God, who gives us the victory *through our Lord **Jesus Christ***.

I haven't won the victory. I can't win the victory. I won't win the victory. *But Jesus already has.*

Jesus has won the victory. And so, on your best day and on your worst day, when you feel strong and when you feel incredibly weak, grab hold of Jesus by faith. For as 1 John 5 says "everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—*our faith*."

Weep, for the moment if you must. Cry out to God in your affliction! Lord knows, the Psalmist did! Lord knows, even Jesus did! But brothers and sisters: take heart! And heed the promise of Revelation 5: "Weep no more; behold, **the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, he has conquered.**"

Discussion questions

(1) How does promise of Revelation 5 [“Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, he has conquered”] read through the lens of Paul in 1 Corinthians [“[T]hanks be to God, who gives us the victory *through our Lord Jesus Christ*”] change the way we think about living a victorious Christian life? How does the surety of Christ’s victory help us to root our ability to overcome in his already-won victory?

(2) In expositing the command of Jesus, John argued: “**Me-centric love** views the excitement of emotional exuberance and attention directed at the self as a commodity to seek out; **others-centered love** is less like a self-serving commodity and more like others-centered, burden-bearing cross. It delights in the spiritual good of others rather than the emotional retrieval of past spiritual nostalgia or the constant pursuit of a spiritual high. Jesus is calling us to remember, repent, and return to an *others-centered* love.” How is others-centered love actually more life giving, not only to others, but to ourselves, than the retrieval of mountain top spiritual experiences and the excitement of immature periods of our lives?

(3) Many evangelicals and Bible-believing Christians hear a warning like the warning from Jesus in Revelation 2, and we soften his words with the pillow of our preferred theology. We say ‘once-saved-always-saved’ and stake our claim that our theology about Jesus should take precedent over the words of Jesus himself. How might systems of theology over-reach, causing Scripture and the command of Jesus to submit to another authority, itself derived from Scripture, but functionally muzzling the true Lord of Scripture, and the true voice of Scripture, namely the voice of Jesus Christ?

(4) In the sermon, John framed the critique against the Ephesians as a critique against Pharisaical fundamentalism which he defined as the residue of Christian long-obedience lived out apart from Christian love. In what ways does forming our identity based on what we’re against and viewing others as foils to form our identity according to what we’re better than or the antithesis of?

(5) In focusing on the command to “return to our first love,” it was said that this others-centered love **is a love that is strangely inclined to delight in the joy of others**. What spiritual disciplines or strategies can you employ to default to a position that longs for the spiritual good of others, rather than competition, envy, bitterness, anger, or indifference?

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