Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)

2023-020

May 7, 2023 by Steve Brandon

Have You Lost Your First Love?

Revelation 2:1-7

1. Christ (verse 1)
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Today we begin to look at the churches of Revelation. In Revelation 2 and 3, there are seven churches mentioned. These seven churches are the primary recipients of the Revelation that John received. We can see this in Revelation 1:10, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.” We looked at this last week. This is the primary motif of the book of Revelation. John saw some things. He wrote them in a book. He sent them to these seven churches.

Also, last week, we saw that these churches were all located in Asia minor. Again, it’s important to note that these were real churches in real cities. I mention this because there are interpreters of Revelation who would deny this. They would take each of these seven churches, and identify them with seven era of history.

They say that Ephesus represents the early church until about 100 A. D., when persecution of the church really began in earnest. They believe that Smyrna represents the persecuted church. from 100 A. D., until 313 A. D., when the edict of Milan officially ended persecution of Christians. They hold that Pergamum and Thyatira represent the time until the Reformation in the early 1500’s. that is, through the dark ages, when there was little clarity as to doctrine and much heresy. They say that Sardis represents the time after the Reformation until great revivals came to Britain and America in the early 1800’s. They maintain that Philadelphia represents the days of the Great Awakenings with Whitefield and Edwards and

Spurgeon. Finally, they say that Laodicea represents the modern-day church with all of her wealth.[1]

I do not believe that this is the right approach to these churches. You can pick events out of history to try to make your case. But there are times, when it's so stretched, that it's really not plausible. For instance, it's a stretch to identify the days of the Reformation with the dead church in Sardis. Further, identifying the present day with Laodicea becuase the church is rich and needs nothing has difficulties as well. Try telling this to the church in Africa or India right now?

I mention this simply to make you aware of this interpretation. I do not believe that this is right. I believe that John was writing to real churches in real cities.

Now, the format to each of these seven letters is always the same. They all begin with an address to the angel of the church. We read, "to the angel of the church in Ephesus write" (in Revelation 2:1). We read, "to the angel of the church in Smyrna write" (in Revelation 2:8). This continues on for all of the other churches. See Revelation 2:12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14.

There are two lines of interpretation regarding who these angels are. Some view them as guardian angels, who watch over the church. Some view them as the pastors of the church, in the sense that an angel is a messenger, and this is what pastors do, they deliver God's message to God's people. Both views have problems. First of all, nowhere in Scripture do we see the concept of a guardian angel over a particular church. Second, nowhere in Scripture do we ever see pastors called angels. So, what's right? I don't know. Perhaps there is some apocalyptic ambiguity here.

But either way, the meaning is the same. There are seven messages that need to be communicated to seven churches. And they were, as this Revelation was sent to all the churches, and as the churches heard this Revelation, the message was communicated. Anyway, that's how all of the letters begin, by addressing the angel of the church.

They then continue with a description of Jesus, tying us back to the description we looked at last week in chapter 1. Consider the following verses:

> Revelation 2:1 - the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.
> Revelation 2:8 - the words of the first and the last, who died and came to

life
Revelation 2:12 the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword
Revelation 2:18 - The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnish bronze.
Revelation 3:1 - The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.
Revelation 3:7 - The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David,
Revelation 3:14 The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

Each of these descriptions are particular to each of the churches. In other words, there's a reason why these particular attributes of Jesus are mentioned to each of the churches. It's appropriate for the church that is facing persecution, possibly to death, to hear that Jesus died and came to life. It's appropriate for those churches tolerating false doctrine to hear of the flaming power of Jesus. As we work through these churches, we will see why Jesus included these descriptions of himself to each of the churches.

So, after a description of Jesus, for the most part, each of these letters continue with some good things about the church. Then, for the most part, they continue with some bad things about the church, that need to change.

As the letter closes, they all include the similar phrase, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This phrase is repeated verbatim in Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

Also at the end of the letter, there is a promise to the one who conquers (2:7, 11, 17, 28; 3:5, 12, 21). The one who conquers is the one who overcomes. That is, the one who continues on in the faith. Despite the troubles at their church! they are still faithful in following the Lord! This is the thrust of the entire book of Revelation. It was written to persecuted Christians, who needed strength to endure! Revelation is a call for all of us to persevere until the end! Revelation is written to strengthen us to persevere, to conquer.

You see these things in every letter!

- A greeting to the angel.
- A description of Jesus.
- Something good.

- Something bad.
- A call for all to listen.
- A promise to the one who conquers.

As we go on from week to week, these patterns will fall into place, and you will see them. and you will get used to them. _____

Now, before we jump into our text in chapter 2 this morning, I want for us all to think about the call for all of us to listen. Jesus says to every church, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." These weren't private letters. They were public letters. They were intended for every church to read (or listen to being read). Because, as this Revelation went out to the seven churches, it was certainly read in one church. Then taken to another church, and read publicly. Then taken to another church, and read publicly.

There was a blessing in this. Do you remember Revelation 1:3? "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near." Every one of the churches would hear what Jesus said to every other church. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

But we also have ears, though we live 2,000 years after the first writing of the Revelation. So we too are invited to read the mail that Jesus sent to every church. The key application of chapters 2 and 3 for us is simple: "What would Jesus say about our church?" "What would Jesus say about Rock Valley Bible Church?" This is the heart behind the title of a book written by Richard Mayhue, entitled, "What Would Jesus Say About Your Church?"[2]

These are open letters to seven churches. And what Jesus says to these churches is similar to what Jesus might say to churches today. And so, it calls us to think about what Jesus might say to our church. What would Jesus say about our church? This isn't WWJD, "What would Jesus do?" This is WWJS, "What would Jesus say?" What would Jesus say about Rock Valley Bible Church? This is the question that we will ask each week as we look, one by one into the letter that Jesus writes to each of these churches. To each of the letters, we will ask, "What would Jesus say about Rock Valley Bible Church?"

This morning, we will be looking at what Jesus said to the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7). He will tell them some good. He will tell them some bad. But the heart of his criticism comes in verse 4, "I have this against you, that you have

abandoned the love you had at first." So, the apt application toward us this morning comes by way of a question: “Have we (as a church) lost our first love.” The question comes to every one of you, “Have you lost your first love?” The question comes to me, “Have I lost my first love.” Thus, the title of my message, “Have you lost your first love?”

We will get to verse 4 and press this application. But let’s begin with reading the text.

Revelation 2:1-7
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. 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. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 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. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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.’"

To give you some hooks this morning as we walk through the text, I have six words for you all. They all begin with the letter, “C,” just to show you that I have put some thought into these words. Here's the first word:

1. Christ (verse 1)

In verse 1, we have a mention of Jesus.

> 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.'"

We saw this back in chapter 1. This was the strange image that John saw about Jesus. He was clothed in a white robe with a golden sash. His hair was white, like white wool, like snow. He had eyes of fire and feet of burnished bronze. His voice was like the roar of many waters.

The particular detail of this image that Jesus pulls out in verse 1, is of the seven stars and the seven lampstands. The stars are the angels of the churches. The lampstands are the seven churches (verse 20). I think the point is this: Jesus walks closely in and among the churches. He knows what's going on.

In fact, that's how he continues.

> Revelation 2:2-3
> 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. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

Jesus knows what's going on in the church in Ephesus. Jesus knows what's going on at Rock Valley Bible Church. He walks closely among the churches. Now, in verses 2 and 3, we see, ...

2. Commendation (verses 2-3)

The church in Ephesus had a lot going for it. They did many things well. They labored for Jesus. They toiled for Jesus. They patiently endured much for Jesus. They didn't tolerate evil. They didn't tolerate false teaching. They were discerning. They were patient. They didn't give up! all for the name of Jesus.

All of these things are good things. It is good to work and labor and toil for Jesus. It's good to tell others of Jesus. It's good to be the hands of mercy of Jesus in serving others. It's good to work in the nursery. It's good to teach the children. It's good to pray for others. It's good to bring and serve snacks for our Sunday morning fellowship time. It's good to have people into your home. It's good to provide meals for those in need, and visit the sick, and give to the hungry. It's good to help the weak and serve your neighbors. It's good to labor during the work day at church. It's good mowing the lawn at church and shovel the snow. It's good to greet people as they come to church and give financially to the church. It's good to say the encouraging word. It's good to lead us in worship or sing to the Lord in the congregation. It's good to lead the youth group. It's good to hang around church, looking for someone to encourage. It's good to rejoice with those who

rejoice and weep with those who weep. It is good to work and labor and toil for Jesus. All of these things are needed and necessary in the life of any church. This is what the church in Ephesus was doing. Jesus knew that, and he recognized this.

> Revelation 2:2
> I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance,

The church in Ephesus had learned well what Paul had written to them years before. Do you remember Ephesians 4, which talks about the way the church should function?

> Ephesians 4:11-12
> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

In other words, when Paul wrote to the church, he said that God gave the leaders of the church to equip the people of the church for the ministry, that the church would be built up. That's exactly what was being done in Ephesus. The people were serving. The church was being built! Beyond the mere labor of the church, the church was fighting for the purity of the church.

> Revelation 2:2
> I know ... how you cannot bear with those who are evil.

I take this to mean that they were practicing church discipline. If there were those in their midst who were professing faith in Christ, and yet, clearly living contrary to their profession, the church wasn't tolerating it. Such a one would certainly have been confronted gently. urged to follow in actions what they profess with their mouth, and given much time for repentance to be obvious. But when such people refused to walk in the ways of the Lord, the church would banish them from their midst.

The church in Ephesus could not "bear with those who are evil." Jesus says that this is a good thing. May I note that Jesus commends the church for being intolerant! This stands in contrast to the church in Thyatira. They tolerated the immorality of Jezebel (Revelation 2:20). But that was not tolerated in Ephesus. Jesus commends them for this.

Furthermore, the church in Ephesus was discerning! Look again at verse 2.

Revelation 2:2
I know ... how you have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

In the days of the early church, the Bible hadn't been gathered together and codified into one document. so you had others who would be spokesmen for God to guide the church. It was a ripe time for false teachers. Whenever an "apostle" or "prophet" would come into the church in Ephesus, seeking to guide the church, the church would test them to see if they were genuine or not. and many times, they were found to be false.

Again, the church in Ephesus had learned well the letter that Paul had sent them earlier. The leaders were equipping. The saints were serving. The church was being built in unity. The result comes in Ephesians 4:14.

Ephesians 4:14
so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

The church wasn't being carried about by "every wind of doctrine." No, they were discerning about the truth and the teaching that was coming into the church. They didn't tolerate any false teaching. They were discerning. This is unlike the church in Pergamum. In the church in Pergamum were some who held to the teaching of Balaam (2:14) and the Nicolaitans (2:16). Perhaps int eh name of being "open-minded" or "tolerant." But not so the church in Ephesus. They didn't tolerate any false teaching.

Perhaps their discernment goes back to the early days of the church. Do you remember that tender scene when Paul called the elders of the church in Ephesus to Miletus, so that he could greet them for one last time? He told the elders the following:

Acts 20:28-31
Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among

> your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

In other words, the church is vulnerable. The church is like a flock of sheep is vulnerable to wolves, so also is a church in danger of false teachers arising in your midst. The elders of the church need to be diligent to be shepherds of the flock, protecting it from the false influences that would come in.

Those in the church would need to buy in. And they did. The church was discerning, rejecting those who would bring in any sort of false teaching! The church was faithful to Christ.

> Revelation 2:3
> I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

The church was faithful for years. enduring patiently, bearing up not growing weary. The church in Ephesus wasn't some mere flash-in-the-pan church, that put up in the store front for a year or so, and then vanished. No, the church in Ephesus had endured. From best we can tell, this was being written some forty years after Paul admonished the elders of the church to keep watch over the flock. That's an entire generation! Forty years of faithfulness!

Everything that this church in Ephesus was, is everything that I hope Rock Valley Bible Church to be: Hard working, serving, diligent, and discerning. I would love for Jesus to say to us, "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. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary." But then comes the "but."

> Revelation 2:4
> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

This leads us to my third point:

3. Caution (verse 4)

After being commended (in verses 2 and 3), Jesus now cautions them. Not all is good in Ephesus. They had “abandoned the love” they had at first.

Now, interpretations of this phrase are manifold. Some say that they lost their love for God! After all, when we come to Christ, this is our first love! When we realize that God’s love has come upon us in Christ, that by his grace we can be forgiven of our sin, by simply trusting in him! Our first response is love for God, that we would be so kind to us to bring us into his family! This is the “first love” that many say those in Ephesus lost, a love for God.

Others say that they lost their love for others! This is natural, at first, the church comes together in vibrant love for one another. and then, after some time, sin crops us. and people are offended. and people are disappointed with each other. and love grows cold. This is the “first love” that many say those in Ephesus lost, a love for others.

Still others say that they lost their love for those without Christ. They lost their love for the lost. Isn’t this often the case that when someone comes to Christ, it’s all so new and exciting, that they can’t help, but to tell others. They tell their friends and their family of their hope in Christ. They tell their neighbors and co-workers. But given some time, relationships drift. and soon, you don’t have much contact with those outside the church, as your friends are all inside the church. and soon, you find, it’s easier to keep in your shell. This is the “first love” that many say those in Ephesus lost, a love for the lost.

So, what is being talked about here? Is it upward love for God that was abandoned? Is it inward love for those in the church that was abandoned? Is it outward love for those outside the church and without Christ that was abandoned?

The reality is that we don’t know. Personally, I believe that the Spirit of God has left this intentionally ambiguous for us, lest we apply this wrongly. For instance, suppose we think that the issue with Ephesus was that they lost their love for the lost. We might wrongly comfort ourselves, thinking that our continued heart for evangelism is what really matters, even if our heart for God is cold. Or, if we believe that the matter with Ephesus is that they lost their love for one another, then we could easily justify ourselves in thinking that it is fine to neglect those without Christ, because our love for others in the church is what’s important.

And so the big application of my message comes: “Have You Left Your First Love?” What are some things that you used to do that you don’t do anymore?

My wife and I were talking about this yesterday. One of the things that we have lost is the anticipation and desire for new people at church. I remember in the early days, really praying for, and greeting with open hand and hearts whoever would come and join us at Rock Valley Bible Church. If we were on vacation, we would call somebody, and ask, “Was anybody new at church?” We have lost that love. As time has gone on, and as the church has gone, it doesn’t feel as desperate as before. Along with this is having new people at church at our house. In the early days of Rock Valley Bible Church, we would prepare food for lunch, and watch for whoever might be new, and invite them on Sunday after church for lunch at our house. It was our heart to gather in new people at church. We have lost that love. We used to do that, but we don’t any more.

Perhaps there are things in your life that once were precious to you, but you have lost your love for them. Perhaps it would be helpful for you to have a discussion at your own house about these things. What are some things that you used to do that you don’t do anymore? And I love that question, because it’s not something new. it’s something that you used to do, it’s something that you used to love. You were capable at one point, but have simply let it slip.

And that’s the next point of Jesus in verse 5, I’m calling it the ...

4. Cure (verse 5)

> Revelation 2:5
> 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.

The commands are clear: 1) Remember; 2) Repent; 3) Repeat what you did before.

What I love about this is that Jesus isn’t calling us to do some new thing. But he tells us to return and do what we have already done before, but have lost the heart for now. That’s why I have asked the question of you: What are some things that you used to do *that you don’t do anymore*?

We can easily come up with excuses. Things change. Regarding the Brandons, when the church was just beginning, we needed people to survive! Thus, our heart for people was great! They might come and contribute to the church. But now, we have enough people and our time is filled. It’s filled with discipleship and

administration that we didn’t have in the early days. But it’s all an excuse.

You may have excuses as well. But Jesus is calling us to return to our passions. Did you notice how works oriented the words of Jesus are? Jesus calls those in the church to "do the works you did at first." That's because repentance manifests itself in works. You turn from one action to another. Now, that's not to say that it's all external. These should be internally motivated works, done in love.

If we fail to repent , the consequences are clear.

> Revelation 2:5
> [Remember, repent, and repeat] ... If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Jesus will shut the church down. Now, this happened in history. The church in Ephesus is no longer present. In fact, this happens to almost every church at one time or another. Very few churches can trace their history back hundreds of years. It may happen to us.

This morning, it is happening to another church in town. It is a "sister church" of ours. It is their last Sunday morning meeting this morning. Now, I’m not saying that they are closing at a church because they left their first love. But the church is having its last service today.

The closing of the church this morning has hit my wife and I especially hard, because they are a church just like we are. Their beliefs are very similar to ours. We have done ministry together. I have friends at their church. I have felt the fragility of our own church.

They aren’t the only small church that is closing its doors. During my days in Rockford, I have seen several other churches close their door. They were once vibrant places of activity, but slowly, over time, they have dwindled and ceased being a church. I know of another church with similar beliefs to us that is considering closing its doors. It may happen to us. May it not be because we left our first love!

Regarding us as a church, are there things as a church that we used to do that we aren't doing any more? I have been struck by prayer meeting. In the early days of the church, we had a high percentage of people come to our prayer meeting at 9am. For some reason, this has dwindled a bit. Perhaps we have lost our first love

for prayer.

Furthermore as a church, perhaps we all have come lax in longing and praying and seeking for new people to come to church. Where once we sought to market the church and reach out personally to people, perhaps we have lost our love for this.

Again, I'm not asking you this morning to do something that you have never done before, as if you need to start something new. I'm simply asking of you have lost your love for something at church that you are no longer doing.

May God grant us repentance this morning. Revelation isn't an easy book. This book is about enduring through persecution. The letter to Ephesus is calling us to cultivate again an affection that we used to have.

5. Commendation (verse 6)

> Revelation 2:6
> Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

This is a good thing that Jesus commends those in Ephesus for. Jesus hated the works of the Nicolaitans. So do those in Ephesus. Jesus commended them for this hatred.

Now, we have no idea who the Nicolaitans are. One of the seven men assigned in Acts 6 to serve tables was named, "Nicolas." There are some who think that this sect came from this man. We have no idea if this is the case.

However, it’s a sign of love that Jesus would add this. Though Jesus hit them hard in verse 4, in verse 6, he is commending them. Jesus is encouraging them that there is hope for them. Yes, they lost their first love, but Jesus knows that they are doing some good things.

Note here also that Jesus isn't telling those in Ephesus to compromise their theological discernment for the sake of "love." He is commending them for their theological discernment! He is encouraging them to make sure that in their theological discernment, they need to have love!

Parenthetically, here is a little bit of application for you. Whenever you have a need to confront you, I encourage you to use "The Ephesian sandwich." Begin

with commending them, like Jesus did in verses 2 and 3. Then, slide into the criticism, as Jesus did in verse 4. But end with more affirmation, like Jesus does here in verse 6. I have sought to do this in my pastoral ministry in my confrontation of people. It has worked well to express my heart of love to those I have needed to rebuke.

6. Call (verse 7)

> Revelation 2:7a
> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Let us all snoop in on the mail that Jesus sent to the Ephesians. Let's listen to what Jesus said. But don't leave it at simply letting the message go into our ears, but let us heed to the warning and let it affect our lives. May we submit to the message of Jesus if the situation fits our situation.

Jesus continues with a further word.

> Revelation 2:7b
> To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

How would we conquer? By returning to our first love!

As we recapture our first love, Jesus promises us a portion of the tree of life. This is a promise of eternal life. This is the reward of conquering in this life.

This is the tree that was mentioned in the beginning of the Bible. It was present when Adam and Eve were in the garden. And this tree will make another appearance at the end of Revelation.

> Revelation 22:1-2
> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.

This is life! The is the life that we will enjoy if we simply return to our first love. And it may just be that if we don't return to our first love, we will not eat from the tree of life.

We see the bookends of the Bible. The Bible begins with the tree of life in Paradise. The thief on the cross is promised to be with Jesus in Paradise. Then the Bible ends with the tree of life in the Paradise of God.

We get to eat of this! We get to live! So, I encourage you to cultivate afresh your first love.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 7, 2023 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

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[1] See https://christianitybeliefs.org/revelation-timeline-decoded/the-seven-churches-of-revelation-2-and-3/

[2] Richard Mayhue, *What Would Jesus Say About Your Church?* (Channel Isles, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications: 2002).