

Christ Counsels the Church in Culture: Ephesus

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Worship

Introduction:

The churches of Asia were in a cultural war. Their government was against them. False religion and even false teaching within the church was rampant. In the midst of this scenario, seven churches represented different approaches to the cultural battle. The first of these churches was in Ephesus. As we examine this one, remember we are only looking at part of Christ's advice for His church in the cultural battle. Over time we will examine all seven churches and get the full picture. To help us in our cultural battle, we need to see what Ephesus got right, where they were fallen and what was God's solution. Nothing in this lesson should be viewed as an accusation against this congregation or against anyone here. Rather, where we mirror Ephesus, we need to follow Jesus' advice to them.

Discussion:

- I. "...this you do have..."—what Ephesus got right.
 - A. "*I know your deeds and your toil and your perseverance...and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.*" In **Galatians 6:9**, Paul warned, "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary." Ephesus was a busy and working congregation. Notice the progression—they worked, they worked hard, they worked hard even in the face of hardship, they did so without growing weary. They were doing a lot of things. They had lots of plans and worked to execute those plans. They had lots of volunteer labor. How do we compare? If everyone were just like you, how would we compare?
 - B. "*You cannot tolerate evil men...and hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans.*" According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Ephesus had become "a sanctuary for the criminal, a kind of city of refuge, for none might be arrested for any crime whatever when within a bowshot of its walls. There sprang up, therefore, about the temple a village in which the thieves and murderers and other criminals made their homes" (Eerdmans, 1976, v II, p 961). The temple of Diana was a haven of unrepentant criminals. The Ephesian church, however, understood that Jehovah's temple was not a place for hiding in sin. The Ephesians would not tolerate hypocrisy within their midst and refused to cover up for their members. Neither would they tolerate the Nicolaitans, who, like Balaam, put stumbling blocks before the brethren to turn to idolatry and commit immorality (**Revelation 2:15**). Ephesus would not even tolerate those who would push the envelope and walk as close to the line of sin as possible. How do we compare? If everyone were just like you, how would we compare?
 - C. "*You put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.*" In **Acts 20:28-30**, Paul had warned the Ephesians that savage wolves would come from their own number. They took the warning seriously, putting "apostles" to the test. John had earlier written that Christians should "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (**I John 4:1**). There was only one source of teaching—the apostles' doctrine (cf. **Acts 2:42**)—Ephesus was devoted to it. They would not allow anyone to come in with error. Ephesus was a citadel of truth. They would not allow deviation from God's will. How do we compare? If everyone were just like you, how would we compare?
- II. "I have this against you..."—Ephesus was fallen.
 - A. "*You have left your first.*"
 1. I believe this picture is, like **Jeremiah 2:2-3**, a picture of that initial love of the married—the absolute devotion, hanging on every word, excited to be in their presence, following them wherever they go love. For all the good Ephesus did with hard work, doctrinal correctness and moral purity, they were no longer motivated by that initial love. They were like the couple just going through the motions of marriage because they know they are supposed to. They had lost that loving feeling. They were still working hard at doing right things but the motivation had shifted. They were no longer motivated by their love for God or for those whom God loved (cf. **I John 4:20; James 3:9**).
 2. Because of verses like **I John 5:2-3**, we correctly teach love is keeping God's commandments. We must, however, recognize that a strict adherence to God's rules can still be less

than love. Paul claimed it was possible to give all his possessions to the poor and still not love them. He also claimed he could die a martyr's death and still not love God (**I Corinthians 13:3**). If he did those things without love, they were useless. Jesus said the two greatest commands were to love God and our neighbors (**Matthew 22:37-39**). Loving God and loving the people God loves is the motivation for what Christians do. Further, the goal of everything we do is to help produce love in ourselves and others (**I Timothy 1:5; Hebrews 10:24**). The Ephesians had started there, but they had slipped from this.

3. Why had this fall taken place? We cannot completely be sure. However, if the analogy we have developed from **Jeremiah 2:2** is apt, perhaps we can consider a parallel with the cooling of love's heats in too many marriages. Why does the initial love of marriage often fade? Usually because neither our spouse nor life in marriage end up being what we expected. Life with God and as a Christian rarely turns out the way we expected. When things don't go the way we thought they would, our love for God and the people He loves can fade.

B. *Where this would lead.*

1. First, clearly note that while the Ephesian church was still doing a great deal that was right, it apparently had stopped doing something. Part of God's advice in **Revelation 2:5** was "do the deeds you did at first." This was not just an issue of emotion and motivation. Because they had left their first love, their walk was impacted (cf. **Ephesians 4:1-3; 5:1-2**).
2. Second, we need to recognize there was no way to put a stopper on this progression. If the Ephesian church could just hang out where they were, there may not have been much need to correct them. The problem is, just as we have seen in too many marriages, there is no way to just hang out in this "we're mostly doing what is right even though we don't love each other anymore" phase. That is going to progress to "we're not even doing what is right, but can we be expected to? We don't love each other anymore" phase. I believe this problem in Ephesus would cause one of two things.
 - a. The first possibility is they would do just what Israel had done after abandoning their betrothal love. See **Jeremiah 2:5-8**. They completely abandoned God and went after other lovers, following after emptiness and becoming empty. From the outside, because a congregation like Ephesus is so intent on doctrinal and moral purity, it looks like it is a long way from apostasy. However, it is only one step away. Because there is no longer intense love for God or the people God loves, there is little devotion to God's will. It will not take much for Satan to conquer the congregation.
 - b. The second possibility is the problem of the Pharisees. Interestingly, as Jesus rebuked the Pharisees in **Luke 11:42**, he said they paid a great deal of attention to the minute details of God's rules, but they neglected God's love. While the Pharisees lived with the delusion that they were the one's who were right with God, they were not obeying Him at all. They had drawn line after line and box after box around God's law such that they eventually became more enamored with their own lines than they were with the law of God they had initially held in such high esteem (see **Matthew 15:3**). As such, they became useless to God, traveling land and sea to make one proselyte but only making him twice the son of hell (**Matthew 23:15**).

- C. "*I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place.*" The ultimate problem for Ephesus is if they did not fix this problem, Jesus was going to judge them. He would remove their lampstand. I don't know if this meant they might still exist as a congregation but not be considered faithful or if it meant Jesus would actually send a destructive judgment on them. Whichever the case, the point is clear. Without change, they would be judged. The question remains—how do we compare? If everyone were just like you, how would we compare?

III. "He who has an ear, let him hear..."—The resolution.

A. "*Remember from where you have fallen...*"

1. First, we note that Jesus' advice to Ephesus demonstrates they loved properly when they entered into their covenant with Christ. If any church or Christian recognizes they were never devoted to God and the people God loves, this is not the advice for them. They must learn to love God and their neighbors. But Ephesus had once loved God intensely with that betrothal type love.

2. Second, those who have fallen from the initial devotion and betrothal type love for God must remember from where they have fallen. Bring to mind what life was like when you loved God and your neighbor. How did you obey God at that time? How did you treat your neighbor at that time? How did you relate to your brethren at that time? When we remember what our life with God was like during that time and how it has changed, I have no doubt we will be saddened. We will mourn for our change in the relationship. As **II Corinthians 7:9-10** says, that will lead us to Jesus' next advice.
- B. "...and repent..." How many times have we heard in sermons and classes what "repent" means? We must think through again. If we have fallen from our first love, we have gotten into a faulty manner of thinking. If Christianity for us has become nothing more than adhering to a list of rules because we think that is what it means to be Christian, we need to think through our lives, outlook and work again. We need to bring our thoughts in line with God's thoughts, our outlook in line with God's outlook and our work in line with God's will.
 - C. "...and do the deeds you did at first..." As we commented above, though Ephesus was still doing a lot of good, hard work, they had apparently stopped doing some things. We have no idea what Ephesus had stopped doing. However, if our parallel with **Jeremiah 2:2** is appropriate, we can gain some insight into accomplishing this advice from Jesus. As with marriage, when the love cools, actions change. If we want to revive that initial love in our marriages, we need to revive the actions love produced. Opening doors, bringing gifts, devoted time of listening and conversation, holding hands, just being together even when the spouse is doing something we are not that interested in. Those were all things we did in our betrothal type love. One of the best ways to regain that love is to reinstitute those practices. The same is true if we have left our initial love for God and the people God loves. Having remembered where we once stood and what we once did when we had that absolute devotion to God as a newlywed to Him, we should reinstitute those works. We don't know the specifics about Ephesus, but we are specifically told of the devotion of the first Christians in **Acts 2:42**. I imagine it was the same for Ephesus. Their devotion to God caused them to be devoted to the apostle's doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. Being intensely devoted to God, they hung on His every word, listening to what He said through the apostles. Being intense friends with God, they wanted to be friends with God's friends, spending time in joint spiritual participation with God's children. Being intensely grateful for God's love, they weren't constantly looking for something new but constantly remembering the great love God showed through Jesus' sacrifice. Being intensely devoted to God, they talked to Him in prayer. If we have fallen from this initial devotion, we need to think about what walking with God was like when we were devoted in these ways and return to them. The love will come. We can rarely feel our way into new actions, but amazingly enough we can often act our way into new feelings or into rekindling old feelings.

Conclusion:

How do we compare? Are we getting the doctrine and the moral purity correct? Are we working hard? Are we doing those things from the wrong source of motivation? Have we left our first love? Did we ever have that kind of initial betrothal type love for God? We are in a battle with our culture. To the extent that we mirror Ephesus's approach to this cultural clash, we need to heed Jesus' advice for them. As Jesus said at the end of each letter, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." When we overcome by the grace of Jesus Christ, heeding His advice, He will grant us to eat of the tree of life that we might live forever in the Paradise of God (cf. **Genesis 3:22**).