

Love First – Revelation 2:1-7
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Revelation calls the church to patient and confident perseverance and encourages God’s people in that call with a vision of Jesus as the victorious, powerful, glorious Messiah who is “among” us. There was perhaps no more difficult place in the world to do this than Ephesus. Perseverance requires tough minded devotion to what is right, consistent discipline in our walk, and a steadfast commitment to obey God’s Word. The church in Ephesus was doing all this – and doing it well. However, in their tough minded, disciplined, and steadfast acts of devotion, they set aside the most important reason for perseverance; love.

But who could blame them?

Ephesus was the largest city in the region, with a diverse population complete with a flourishing culture of Emperor worship (Temple of Sebastoi – Vespasian, Titus, Domitian),



as well as the cult of Artemis (sister of Apollo) whose Temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The priesthood of the Artemis cult were prominent community members, and much business depended on the well-being of the Temple. It was extremely difficult, costly, and dangerous to be a Christ-follower in Ephesus, and Christians were not viewed or treated very well. (Acts 18)

Since there was such animosity and mistreatment toward the church, why not push back; fight fire with fire? Shouldn’t love sometimes be tough? Who is to say that we shouldn’t fight back?

Actually, Jesus did.

Jesus commended their tough-mindedness and confronted the absence of tender-heartedness. He encouraged them on their commitment to truth and exhorted them to remember the equally important commitment to grace. Jesus reminds them that doing right things cannot be divorced from being a presence of love. Love joins a tough mind to a tender heart. Love keeps compassion within discipline, love keeps joy in obedience, and love establishes hope within suffering.

Without love, work doesn’t work.

How do we return and practice persevering love?

1. Love Listens – *These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands ... **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.** – Revelation 2:1,7*

2 I know your deeds ... Yet I hold this against you ... Repent ... – Revelation 2:1-2, 4,5

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, 12 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in. – Proverbs 3:11-12

"Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future."- Proverbs 19:20

We must be willing to receive both commendation and confrontation. This is stereo.

2. Love Discerns - *I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. – Revelation 1:2*

- Love rejoices with the truth. There is a protective reality in love, a healthy kind of jealousy that preserves and protects what keeps the relationship thriving.

Faithfulness to Christ demands keeping the teachings of his word with integrity and purity.

The **testing** here indicates there was a process involved (Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians, 3 John). Such processes are attempts to handle conflicts in a redemptive and restorative manner.

The process of reconciliation depends on the attitude of the offender, the depth of the betrayal, and the pattern of offense. An unrepentant offender will resent your desire to confirm the genuineness of their efforts. The offender may resort to lines of manipulation such as, "I guess you can't find it in yourself to be forgiving," or, "Some Christian you are, I thought Christians believed in love and compassion." Such language reveals an unrepentant heart.

- There is nothing unloving about the placement of appropriate boundaries when one's actions prove to be detrimental to the well-being of the relationship.

3. Love Does - *I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance ... 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. – Revelation 1:2,3*

- Faith is not an interior state so much as something that shapes life and shows itself in action. – Ian Paul

4. Love Repents - *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.*

The pressure and animosity from outside spilled over into the church. They were returning hostility and animosity with the same spirit to those outside the church and among themselves.

- All the work in the world is worth nothing without love at its heart.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. – 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Love for whom? God, neighbor (whether fellow or enemy)- *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. – 1 John 4:20*

What about non-believers or enemies? - *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. – Romans 12:17-21*

- Gospel love rejects that it's right to do wrong to do right.

If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. – Revelation 2:4-6

5. Love Re-members - 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

- “Repentance is not merely feeling sorry or being sorry. It is a turning in one’s attitude and actions, not merely a change of heart, but a change of life and lifestyle.” Ben Witherington III

Remember, not to reminisce, but to repent, renew, and reform.

To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. – Revelation 2:7

On the grounds of the ancient Temple to Artemis was a garden with “sacred” tree that provided asylum for criminals regardless of their guilt or repentance. Perseverance was for self-preservation and self-love. Jesus seizes upon this in comparing it to the true paradise of God and the ultimate Tree of life.

The paradise of God is not accessible to those whose motive is self-preservation. It is in sacrificial love for God and others, as Jesus demonstrated on the tree of life (the cross), it is in laying life down that true life is experienced. It is in repentance and surrender that love is received and life is preserved.

Both the 1st and the 21st century church are called to perseverance. Then as well as now, however, we cannot speak of perseverance without love for each other, even our enemies, in spite of their unloving attitudes toward us. Sound impossible? Without the love and grace of Jesus, it is. This is why the heart of Christian faith is not in the first instance ethical or institutional, but relational – in relationship to Jesus and with one another as the Body of Christ.

Questions to Dig Deeper

- What comparisons would you make between the difficulty of being faithful in Ephesus and the challenge of being faithful today?
- The message of our culture, even within the church often, is one of retaliation, getting even, fighting back, or other forms of returning fire with fire. What do you do with the Biblical message here?
- Discuss the idea of “loving boundaries.” In what ways can love make discernment both a tough-minded and a tender-hearted action?
- Why is repentance such a vital part of learning how to practice persevering love? How do you explain the role of repentance and confession in the life of a Christian?
- Talk about the meaning of “remember” as Kevin pointed out, “Not nostalgia, or reminiscing, but a re-joining and re-attaching of some that had been cut off.” How does this image help convey what Jesus is calling for?
- Discuss the bottom line: “Without love, work just doesn’t work.” How does the statement apply to your thinking and processing of today’s message?