

"First Love"

By Allan Pole



Theme: Make sure that your relationship with Jesus is top priority.

Text: Revelation 2:1-7

Here's a thought: God loves us enough to accept us just the way we are and He loves you and me enough to call us to change and grow.

A man bought a new hunting dog. Eager to see how he would perform, he took him out one day, hoping to track down big game. No sooner had they gotten into the woods than the animal picked up the trail of a bear and the hunter followed close behind excitedly. Then suddenly the dog stopped, sniffed the ground, and headed in a different direction. He had caught the smell of a deer that had crossed the path of the bear. A few moments later he halted again, this time captivated by the scent of a rabbit that had crossed the path of the deer. And so, on and on it went until finally the breathless hunter caught up with his dog, only to find him barking triumphantly down the hole of a field mouse.

Many new followers of Jesus start out with determination to keep the Saviour first in their lives. But it isn't long before their whole attention is diverted to things of much lesser importance.

If you had the opportunity to sit down with God and talk, what would you ask Him? Would you like to ask Him what is important in life? What if I told you that He has already answered this question? Would you like to know what He said?

Let me give you some background information on the part of the Bible where this answer is found...

The writer of the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John, was banished to the Island of Patmos by the Roman emperor Domitian. The Book of Revelation, written in a time of great persecution around A.D. 96, contrasts the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Satan. The word Revelation is derived from the Latin (revelatio) which means, "to reveal or unveil that which has previously been

hidden".

The seven letters recorded in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 were written to churches in the largest Roman province – the province of Asia. In New Testament times Asia was the name of the Roman province located in the westernmost part of what is now Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey. The seven churches addressed in these letters were all located in the west central part of this province. A circle embracing these cities would have a radius of no more than sixty miles. John had lived here for many years and he was well known to the churches of this area. The Apostle Paul spent a long period of time at Ephesus on his third missionary journey.

Though suffering terribly during the civil wars of the first century B.C., Ephesus enjoyed great prosperity under Rome during the first and second centuries A.D., when the city must have had a population of about a half million. Here the Roman governor resided, and here Paul conducted the longest of his city ministries of two years and nine months (Acts 19:8-10). The city's importance lay in its political prominence, its economic clout derived from its position on major trade routes, and its religious leadership as a centre for the worship of Diana (a Roman goddess), or Artemis (a Greek goddess). Her temple made the city famous and is listed as one of the seven wonders of the world. By the middle of the third century signs of decay appeared in the city, and in 263 Goths raided Ephesus and dealt it a blow from which it never recovered. By the tenth century the prosperous city of Roman times was completely deserted and covered by marshes.

Revelation 1:20 tells us that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.

We are not absolutely sure what John means when he says the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. Basically, the word means messenger. Some believe this refers to the lead visionary elder in each church; others say this implies that each church has its representative angel in heaven. These "angels" are at least the ones through whom these messages are to be conveyed to the seven churches.

Let's now look at what God wants to say in Revelation 2:1-7:

1 To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: 2 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. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. 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. 7 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. NIV

God wants to say:

This You Have Done Well



Paul had traveled to Ephesus and found some followers of Jesus. These people were filled with the Holy Spirit and for almost three years were filled with sound instruction, as Paul stayed on to teach them the Word of God. Just before Paul was arrested and taken to Rome for eventual execution he warned the leaders that false teachers were going to come in and try to destroy the church (Acts 20:29).

The church in Ephesus had done well over the 40 years since Paul had been with them by:

- Doing lots of good work.
- Persevering through time and hardship.
- Providing good teaching – including refusing to tolerate the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Nicolas (see Adam Clarke's Commentary) was one of the original seven deacons listed in Acts 6. Some believe that he and his group got off track by teaching that Christians should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols and to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage.

The Lord commended the Ephesian believers for all of these excellent characteristics.

"You can always find something good to say about people if you try really hard" was a truism a boy had heard his pastor repeat. The young fellow had just started the third grade and was not fond of his teacher, but he determined to think of something nice to say to her.

"Miss Jones," he said one morning, "you're the best third grade teacher I ever had."

The Lord is always careful to affirm His people for what they are doing right. Even the far-from-perfect Corinthian church was affirmed early in the Apostle Paul's letter to them in 1 Corinthians 1:3-7:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 For in him you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge - 6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.
NIV

I am so glad for the Lord's encouragement! He is not a cruel taskmaster, waiting to whack us over the head the moment He sees us doing something wrong. He also notices what we do right. We should be thankful for how He treats us and offer the same in our relationships with others.

The Lord looks at you and wants to affirm you for the positive. He notices it and He commends you for it.

God wants to say:
This You Have Done Well
This You Lack



God loves us enough to accept us just the way we are and He loves you and me enough to call us to change and grow.

When we read Revelation chapter 2 we can scratch our heads wondering, "What were the Ephesians doing that was so wrong? Why would the Lord call them to repent, to ask Him to forgive them for their sin?"

There is a doctrine drifting around that claims followers of Jesus never need to ask Him for forgiveness of sins once they have asked Him to be their Lord and Saviour. The call to repentance - to change one's attitudes and actions - issued to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 blows this theory out of the water.

As commendable as all of these characteristics of the Ephesian church were, they had forgotten this principle: Good works have their place, but they are to flow out of an intimate love relationship with the Lord.

Luke 10:38-42 points to the Martha tendencies within all of us:

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" 41 "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." NIV

Mary's decision to *be* with the Lord rather than simply *do* things for the Lord can be replayed in our lives every day.

What was at stake if the church in Ephesus refused to repent? The Lord warned that He would remove their candlestick from the lamp stand. He is saying that the church there would cease to exist. Apparently the church at Ephesus did not repent, and the threat has been fulfilled. The church died, and for ages there was not a single follower of Christ in Ephesus.

Peter Gillquist commented on the need for renewal in the church in America (in Faith & Renewal, July/August 1992):

Of course, of the seven churches discussed in Revelation, five needed renewal, and that was only 60 years into church history! So this problem is nothing new.

A garden left unattended will accumulate weeds and yield a smaller harvest. A marriage left unattended will grow less passionate. Likewise, a soul left unattended will drift away from God – unless something is done to turn it around.

In my closest human relationship – my marriage with Brenda – I need to be continually feeding it by:

- Keeping short accounts by asking for forgiveness.
- Spending time with her, sharing conversation and experiences together.

This is no less true in our relationship with the Lord. Are you giving attention to this relationship?

God wants to say:
This You Have Done Well

This You Lack
This You Can Have



Some cynical soul has defined “paradise” as merely “Two ivory cubes with dots all over them.” Before I was married I had a fuzzy pair o’ dice hanging from the rear view mirror in my car.

Did you know that you could have a taste of paradise beginning here and now? The Lord’s plan is to restore what we spoiled: the beauty of His creation, the innocence of sinlessness and the fulfillment of intimacy.

Genesis 3:22-24 points to the paradise that we lost when Adam and Eve chose to walk away from God:

22 And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." 23 So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. 24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. NIV

If we continue walking with the Lord through the rest of our days His paradise will be unveiled when we meet Him face to face.

Life sure gets busy. With all of the demands placed upon our time and all of the options we have for activities it is so easy to neglect relationships with even the ones that we love the most. A number of years ago Brenda and I attended a Marriage Encounter Weekend. We started the weekend bogged down in the daily activities of life. We ended the weekend passionately in love, feeling so close to each other. What made the difference? I attribute it to two ingredients:

1. Time – We carved out the time to get to know each other.
2. Tools – We were given the tools to communicate on an intimate level.

Here is a spiritual checklist to monitor your heart’s condition:

- What gets you most excited?
- Is your faith based on being *with* God or on doing things *for* God?
- How are you going to feed your relationship with the Lord?

Jesus explained, “Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.” The Holy Spirit and the Holy Bible are here to lead you closer to Jesus. Begin by immersing yourself in these two so you can return to your first love.

Our future, our family’s future and our community’s future could depend upon our response.

God Wants to Say:

This You Have Done Well

This You Lack

This You Can Have

Make sure that your relationship with Jesus is top priority.

