

Sermon #221

Revelation 2:1-7; 12-17; 18-29

September 24, 2017, [Slide 1, title slide](#)

## Our First Love

What an amazing weekend! They came with their laptops and background studies of our church. They interviewed church leaders, taught workshops, received input from the youth, and then went to work from 5 p.m. on through the wee hours of the morning. I know, I kept looking out to see their cars still in the church parking lot after midnight. Then on Sunday morning they lead us in worship and then presented the prescriptions for our church to work on.

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That was the first weekend of June 2012. I am referring to the missional church consultation process that our church went through with West Ohio Conference consultants. After their arduous investigation process, the consultants presented five strengths, five concerns, and five prescriptions to work on. Our five strengths that they noted include: **1.) a warm, friendly and caring atmosphere; 2.) good resources** (facilities and location); **3.) community connections** (food pantry, WW meals, school partnerships); **4.) an emerging desire to reach the community;** and **5.) multiple worship styles.**

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The five concerns were: **1.) negativity and conflict among some church members; 2.) multi-faceted worship issues** (neither service seemed to be culturally relevant to the community and media and technology needed upgrading); **3.) Lack of leadership development** (volunteers felt overworked, need for new leaders to be developed); **4.) Inward focus** (resulted in a mostly older congregation with few new members); **5.) The church's building and current ministry activity does not reflect welcome to an increasingly diverse community** (need for better signage).

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The five prescriptions addressing these five concerns were: **1.) A breakthrough "love first" initiative** (home fellowship groups); **2.) Worship initiative** (worship enhancement team, off-site worship services, media and electronic upgrades); **3.) Leadership Development initiative** (assimilation process design team, ministry by strengths, training program); **4.) Reclaim an outward focus** (Unbinding the Gospel, ministry audit team, and short-term missional focus team); **5.) Develop key signature ministries** (Signage team, children and youth focus team, audit the space/classroom usage, classroom appearances. One month later, our church voted a 97% approval to adopt these prescriptions that we continue to work on still today in various ways.

Now we are five years out from the consultation report. It's good to reflect and see how far we've come and what more we need to do. Perhaps one of the best ways to do that is to review the last of the messages given to the churches in the book of Revelation. We've already seen the ones who received all good and all bad messages, but these three churches received a mixed review of strengths and concerns, with prescriptions following, much like our consultation.

Today we look at the messages to the churches of Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira. Where might we fit in any of these descriptions? Do we need any of their prescriptions today? We begin with the church at Ephesus.

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#### I. The Church at Ephesus: Do not forsake your first love

Background: The city of Ephesus was a major cultural center in the Roman world and a major seaport of an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 inhabitants. It was the third largest city in the Roman empire. The city was also a center for the worship of Greek and Roman gods. Their magnificent temple to the Roman goddess, Diana was the seventh wonder of the ancient world. In this major urban setting, Paul and his companions planted the first church in southern Asia. The message comes to the church of Ephesus from the words of him who “holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold lampstands” (v. 1). He says, as he does to the other churches, “I know your deeds.” And then he begins with their strengths.

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##### Strengths:

Good deeds

Hard work

Perseverance

Not tolerating wicked people

Testing those who claim to be apostles but are not; instead they are false prophets

Persevered and endured hardships

Have not grown weary for his name

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##### Concerns:

“You have forsaken the love you had at first” (v. 4).

“Consider how far you have fallen” (v. 5)

Question: What was their first love? Scholars all agree that the first love is of course the one who is writing this message, Jesus himself, who walks among the lampstands, his churches. When they reject their first love, they reject him. But not only him, they also reject his people. Love for Jesus and for other people go hand in hand.

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In Mark 12:29-31, Jesus responded to the question about the greatest commandment. He quoted from Deut. 6:4, 5 as he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” But then he also immediately added Lev. 19:18 as the second commandment. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandments were greater than these. Jesus equated our first love with love for God and for our neighbors, for all people everywhere.

But this church at Ephesus had forgotten that. They had done well with keeping many of the other commandments and were commended for that. They did not give in to any of the false doctrines or idol worship, so prevalent in their city. They were like the church that was good at keeping rules, doing all the right things, and making sure all the t's were crossed and all the l's were dotted. But they forgot the most important part of love. And thus, they became legalistic; living more by the book and not the heart. In 1 Cor. 13, Paul wrote about the dangers of a loveless life:

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“If I speak in human or angelic tongues, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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” (v. 1-2).

What does a modern Christian or a modern Ephesus church look like? It's a church that puts rules above love for people and for God. That's not to say that rules aren't important; it's simply where we put our emphasis. I've been in churches where it was more important to not wear shorts or jeans to church, than accepting and loving the people who wore them. I've been told I have to use the King James Bible always or say “the blood of Jesus” in every sermon I preach. At one church people stopped listening to me when I mentioned that a friend of mine and I had played cards. But worse than these are when written or unwritten rules are made about whom we accept into church or who can take communion. That totally rejects the nature of grace. The church at Ephesus was given prescriptions to help them return to their first love.

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Prescriptions:

- 1.) “Repent and do the things you did at first” (v. 5b).
- 2.) “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (v. 5c). In other words, the church will cease to exist and Jesus himself will be the one that closes it down.

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Love requires action – “doing the things you did at first.” When we stop doing them, love dies out. It's the same for husbands and wives. When we stop doing the little things for each other and spending time together, we begin to lose our marital spark. So today, the prescription for all marriages is “to not forsake your first love.” Keep doing the little things for each other. Keep praying for and with each other.

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And then what about our neighbors, who are they? Our neighbor includes all people – foreigners, immigrants, all ethnic groups, all social economic groups. Love for our neighbor helps us to write better laws for immigrants and not tear families apart. Love for white people to blacks and back again requires overcoming racism and all systemic injustices. These are things we cannot tolerate if we truly have love for one another. Love for our neighbor also implies loving those who are hard to love and forgiving those who are non-forgiving; caring for and helping those who in no way can pay us back. And when we improve these, we begin to recover our lost love for Jesus.

As in all the other letters, there is also a final call to victory and to listen. Jesus says to his church, “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (v. 7). How is your first love today? What are you doing to improve your love for Jesus and for others? When you do so, with God’s help, you will be victorious. Jesus concludes this letter on a high note, a note of victory and hope: “To those who are victorious, “I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” This is the tree that is in the final garden of the new heavens and earth (22:2).

The church in Ephesus was high on enduring hardships and not tolerating wickedness, but both the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira seem to have the opposite problem.

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#### II. The Churches at Pergamum and Thyatira: Do not tolerate false teachings

Background: Unlike the city of Ephesus, both Pergamum and Thyatira were not seaports. But they were influential cities of some wealth, particularly Pergamum. Thyatira was probably the least wealthy and influential of all seven cities. Pergamum was the site of the altar of Zeus and the temple of Athena. So much religious worship of false gods was also prevalent in this city. The fallen, sinful nature of humankind was even more widespread than any of the other cities. Thyatira was more of an industrial city, but they also worshiped the emperor and Zeus. Churches were developed in these two pagan urban centers. And Jesus’ message came to both, mentioning both strengths and weaknesses that were contrasting to the Ephesian Church.

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#### Strengths:

Pergamum:	Thyatira:
“Yet, you remain true to my name.” “You did not renounce your faith in me.”	“Your love and faith” “Your service and perseverance” “You are now doing more than at the first”

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#### Concerns:

#### Pergamum:

To the church in Pergamum, Jesus rebukes, “There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality” (v. 14). “Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (v. 15). The church in Ephesus, even though it had lost its first love, still hated the practice of the Nicolaitans, who were some type of false sect within the church. But the church of Pergamum was far too tolerant of these false doctrines and practices.

Thyatira:

To the church in Thyatira, Jesus warns, “I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols” (v. 20). Jezebel was some type of false prophet in that day who had much influence even over the church.

Thus, we have a composite of these two churches that is contrasting to the church of Ephesus. In the Ephesian Church love is not their strong point, but standing strong against false teachings was. In the other two churches, there is too much tolerance of evil and much accommodation to the secular, pagan world around them. Both types of churches need to get together to find the right balance and strength. Here is what it might look like on a compendium.

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Love

Truth

<p>Pergamum and Thyatira Love, faithfulness, service</p> <p>Had been tolerant of false teachings and practices.</p>	<p>Ephesus: Good deeds, hard work, perseverance, no toleration for wicked people</p> <p>Had forsaken their first love</p>
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So, what was the remedy or the prescriptions for these churches?

Prescriptions:

Both churches were called to repent, just as we’ve seen in the other churches who received prescriptions. Repentance for them meant a turning from tolerance and a turning toward the guarding of truth – God’s truth. Question: Can we love God and tolerate false teachings and false practices? No, we can’t. In 1 Tim. 6:20, Paul urged his prized pupil Timothy to “guard what has been entrusted to your care.” And to the church in Rome, Paul wrote, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). And Jesus taught his disciples how to be true followers. He commanded them: “Hold to my teaching... Then you will know the truth, and truth will set you free.” Yes, we must hold on to God’s truth – the truth of his Word and wherever it is found.

Today, we hear much about tolerance, which often means that there are little if any absolute truths anymore. Everything is relevant, so we must simply tolerant everything. Any time you stand up for your convictions, you may be quickly criticized for being a bigot or an extremist, when all you are doing is simply standing on the truth. Now it is good to be tolerant up to a certain point. But tolerance only goes so far. For example, we cannot, we simply must not tolerate young girls being sold into sex traffic

industry. We cannot tolerate innocent mass shootings in schools or mall areas. Nor can we tolerate the spreading of gossip, racial slurs, or inappropriate sexual behavior. In short, we cannot tolerate anything that goes against God's Word.

There were two major ways that the last two churches had become accommodating. That was through 1.) the worship of idols and false religions and 2.) sexual immorality. The Romans, as we've seen worshipped many idols and they were very loose in their sexual morals. So instead of taking a stand on the Word of God in both areas, these churches gave in. Thus, they needed to repent.

Are we taking our stand on God's Word and his truth, or are we accommodating ourselves to the world around us? If we don't stand on the truth, are we really loving God and others? I'd like to suggest that not only did the Ephesian church lose their first love, but so did the Pergamum and Thyatira churches. Their love was not complete because they did not stand on God's truth. So, these last two churches were also called to listen to what the Spirit had to say to the churches and to become overcomers. Those who were victorious in these churches could receive hidden manna (nourishment), a white stone with a new name, authority over the nations, and the morning star. There was hope, and victory was possible.

## Conclusion

Many churches and individual Christians fall on one side of the compendium or the other. They may be high in love, but low in convictions, or high on convictions and low on love. I believe our church is far on the way to becoming a church that truly loves God and all others, and stands firmly on his truth without wavering. We've come a long way in five years. Praise God. Allow him to continue to lead us back to our first love.