

Keeping Our First Love

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Introduction.

- A. Of all of the messages to the churches of Asia in Revelation, perhaps the most haunting of those messages is the one written to the church in Ephesus. Jesus begins by praising the Ephesians for all kinds of good works. As that ancient church heard those words, I'm sure they started feeling pretty pleased with themselves. But then, we see Jesus get to the punch line in Revelation 2:4-5. Despite all of those outward works, there was something deeply wrong with the Ephesians. They were no longer engaging in those good works because of their love for Jesus, and if they didn't rediscover that first love, they were going to be destroyed.
- B. 2000 years later, we can just as easily suffer from the same affliction. It's not at all hard for us to institutionalize our faith. We can go to the right church, engage in all the right acts of worship, go home, do all the morally upright things, and be doing those things for completely the wrong reason. There are a lot of people who wear the name of Christ without having a love for Christ or any desire to build their relationship with Him. They go through the motions because they're "Church of Christ," and that's what Church-of-Christers do, just like all the denominations under the sun have their own patterns of behavior.
- C. This is a subtle spiritual problem, but it's a serious one. Let's look today, then, at some warning signs that tell us that we've fallen into this trap. Let's look at some divine wisdom that will help us keep our first love.

I. Church Activities.

- A. We start struggling with this when we fall into the trap of what Brother Ray Ferris calls "churchianity." Basically, this is religious devotion to a church—any church—instead of to the Lord. The opposite of this, of course, is Christianity, which is dedication to being a disciple of Christ. It's easy to tell which is which.
- B. Let's begin by looking at **SALVATION**. The churchian believes that salvation can only be found **THROUGH THE CHURCH**. In the denominational world, this is sometimes very plain. There are denominations who say in just as many words that salvation is only available through them. In subtler ways, though, this can even appear in churches of Christ. There are plenty of folks who think they're saved because they come to the right building on Sunday morning to worship. Now, don't get me wrong. God certainly requires us to assemble faithfully with a body of the Lord's people, but it is not the sign out front that saves any of us.
- C. Instead, the true Christian believes that salvation comes **THROUGH JESUS**. Consider the words of Peter in Acts 4:10-12. We are added to the church after we are saved, but it is Jesus who saves us in the first place. When we are baptized for the forgiveness of our sins, that is actually an appeal to Jesus to rescue us from our sins by the authority that God has given Him. We are saved not by an institution, but by a Savior.
- D. We see a similar difference of opinion on the subject of **THE BIBLE**. The churchian may not say so, but his actions make it clear that he believes that the Bible is **FOR THE PREACHER**. He will come to services regularly, and he will faithfully sit through Bible class after Bible class and sermon after sermon, but in between services, he won't actually study his Bible on his own. He thinks that private Bible study is uninteresting and unrewarding, so he's willing to let the preacher spoon-feed him for the rest of his days. He's not concerned that he's being taught error, because his faith is in the church, and whatever the church says can't be wrong.
- E. By contrast, the Christian knows that the Bible is **FOR EVERYONE**. Let's look at John's claim in John 20:30-31. We've already seen that salvation is through Jesus, but it's every bit as true that the only way to Jesus is through His word. If we truly want to find life through Jesus, if we want to develop such closeness with Him that He lives in us, we are going to love the word of God, and we are going to eagerly search it. Before Lauren and I got married, when I was living in Beaumont and she was living in Houston, I was eager for information about everything she did, everything she said, and everything she thought, because knowing those things brought me closer to her. In the same way, friends, only study of the word brings us closer to Jesus.
- F. Likewise, the churchian and the Christian will look differently at **HUMAN TRADITION**. Before we go on, let me define what I mean by this. Human traditions are the things that we do that are allowed but not required by the word of God. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul commands that churches take up a collection for the Lord's work on the first day of the week. We do this, but we do it because it is commanded, not because it is traditional. However, at Margaret St., we happen to take up this collection immediately after the invitation hymn. There's nothing in the Bible that commands us to do the collection then. It's just the time that we habitually choose to obey God's commandment. The time of our collection, then, is a human tradition.
- G. The churchian believes that these traditions are **BINDING**. This naturally follows from his belief that whatever the church does is right. He thinks that because the church has always done things in a certain way, that way must be the only way to do it, even if there is no Scripture that says so. For instance, a preacher friend of mine got a sister mad at him when he said a prayer before the collection in the evening. There is

nothing in the Bible that would prohibit such a prayer, but she was certain that because she'd never seen things done that way before, that he was leading the congregation astray. Tradition is law to the churchian.

- H. On the other hand, the Christian understands that human tradition **CAN BE CHANGED**. This doesn't mean that it necessarily has to be changed, but it can be changed if there's a reason. If we start binding the traditions we invent, we're elevating them to the same level as the word of God. Consider Jesus' comments in Matthew 15:7-9. When we presume to order others about on the basis of what we or other men think is right, we dethrone Jesus and replace Him with ourselves. We need to be cautious, then, with binding tradition.
- I. Yet another divide appears in the differing attitudes that many have about **PRAYER**. The practitioner of churchianity thinks that prayer only needs to happen **IN THE ASSEMBLY**. After all, the church traditionally has prayers then: we have an opening prayer, a closing prayer, and maybe even a prayer before Bible class. Those prayers have the satisfaction of habit to the churchian, but he doesn't really have the desire to pray to God at any other time, except maybe during times of crisis. After all, what would he have to talk about?
- J. By contrast, the Christian relishes the privilege of prayer and prays **CONSTANTLY**. He understands the importance of the three simple words found in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. The Bible is God talking to us; prayer is our opportunity to talk back. Folks, if I'm with Lauren and she goes for even fifteen minutes without speaking to me, I start racking my brain, trying to figure out what I've done wrong! We understand that communication is the glue of any relationship, that it is a vital expression of love. Our relationship with God is the same way.

II. Life Activities.

- A. After this, our attitude toward **SECRET SIN** is also going to reveal our hearts. To the churchian, secret sin is **ACCEPTABLE**. Remember: his concern is with the church. He doesn't want to gain the reputation in the church of being a wicked man, so he doesn't engage in public sin, but if he thinks he can practice a sin and never get caught, he's fine with that. He only hates secret sin when it becomes public.
- B. On the other hand, the Christian finds secret sin to be **HATEFUL** because he knows that it is always offensive to God. Consider Moses' warning about secret sin in Psalm 90:8. Although our secret sins have a way of becoming known, it may be possible for us to hide them from men indefinitely. However, God always knows what they are, and if we're true children of God, that bothers us. Christians hate secret sin.
- C. Another flashpoint is our view of **OUTSIDERS**. What do we think about people who aren't faithful members of the church? To the churchian, those people are **TO BE SHUNNED**. He loves his church, and he loves it just the way it is. He is content with the same brethren he's had for the past 20 years, who worship like him, talk like him, and think like him. Outsiders, however, are scary because they aren't like him, and he doesn't care about them anyway, because they're not in the church. Why, then, shouldn't he fear and avoid them? Certainly, he's not going to bother going to all the work of trying to persuade them to obey the gospel.
- D. The Christian, on the other hand, knows that the lost are **TO BE SAVED**. Jesus tells us that this is His mission statement in Luke 19:10. If we are disciples of Christ, and if we are truly devoted to His will, we will take His mission statement for our own. Sure, outsiders are different, and sure, trying to bring the word to others can be scary, but if we aren't willing to invest ourselves in the effort, we establish that Jesus is not in us after all.
- E. Likewise, the churchian and the Christian have different **GOALS** for their lives. The churchian is concerned about one thing. He wants to remain a member of the church in **GOOD STANDING**. This is not a particularly challenging goal. Just as Matthew 18 requires, the only way to get withdrawn from here at Margaret St. is to be openly defiant of God's word. That means that anybody who is willing to put in the effort to just slide by is going to slide by. All he has to do to avoid getting disfellowshipped is to show up at worship services once a week, or once every couple of weeks, and keep his nose out of public, conspicuous sins.
- F. The Christian, on the other hand, wants to **IMITATE JESUS**. We see Paul endorse this attitude in Ephesians 5:1-2. This is not an easy goal; in fact, this is an impossible goal. None of us will ever succeed in perfectly imitating Christ. However, it is the goal that is most dear to the genuine child of God, because we see in Jesus the embodiment of everything that is loving and righteous and good, and we want to be like Him.
- G. Finally, though, the difference between the churchian and the Christian is revealed by what each is willing to **SACRIFICE**. The churchian is willing to sacrifice **SOME THINGS**. Let's not give him too bad a rap, here. He's willing to give up that time on Sunday morning when he could be out cutting the grass instead. He's willing to give up the habits of behavior that would lead other members of the church to shun him. Generally, he will make the sacrifices that are necessary to keep him a part of the church that is the focus of his religion.
- H. The Christian, by contrast, is willing to sacrifice **EVERYTHING**. Look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:20-21. Now, this commandment does not necessarily apply to every Christian today, but what if it did? What if Jesus came up to us tomorrow and said, "Sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, and follow Me?" What would we say? Would we ask for time to build up to that point, or would we place a call to our realtor? Would we tell Jesus we had to provide for our families, or would we trust in God to provide? Would we turn to a million excuses to say no, or would we turn to one reason to say yes? I'm not going to lie to you, folks. I wouldn't have an easy time making the right choice, but as Christians, it's the choice we have to make.

Conclusion. If you want to make the choice to live for Jesus and serve Him with everything, come to Him now.