

How to Get Back on Track

Text:

Revelation 2:1-7

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

Nevertheless I have *somewhat* against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

Introduction:

The text that we have just read is the first of a series of seven short letters written to seven geographically related churches of Asia Minor. These letters are filled with interesting and telling details. The length of a sermon will not permit us to explore all of the details of this short letter, so we will cut to the quick and get to the main point of what we want to learn from this text.

It tells us how to get back on track, or if we are not off track, how to stay on track. This is an important lesson. Too many of us, too often, waste far too much of our lives wandering in the wilderness, when we could be living in the Promised Land. Life is too short, and time is too precious to lose any of it unnecessarily. In this text we are given a sure formula for staying spiritually on track. Before looking at the formula let us put the text into context by looking at the situation in which this church found itself, then at its failure, and finally at the counsel Christ gives it to rectify its failure.

I. Situation

We are most likely in the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. It is the mid 90's A.D. which means that this church has been in existence for 30-40 years. It was founded by the Apostle Paul. Given the situation of Ephesus as the first city of the province of Asia, it had taken on an important role not just in Asia Minor, but in the entire early Christian movement. If John addresses it first in order, it was because it was the oldest and most prominent of the seven churches. It has been blessed with great leadership. Founded by the Apostle Paul, himself, it had then been led by Timothy. John the Apostle of love had spent a significant number of years there before being exiled to Patmos. One could hardly imagine greater privilege.

Having been taught by the apostles, this church knew the difference between truth and error. They could sort out the true teaching of Christ from the false and they had not hesitated to do so. Christ, speaking to them through John, commends them for their patient and laborious stand for truth. Their strength had, however, become the source of their spiritual stumbling.

II. Complication

The "nevertheless" at the beginning of verse 4 forebodes that all is not well in Ephesus. It is followed by the words of accusation, "I have somewhat against you". All of the good that they have done and are doing will not counterbalance their failure. If they do not eliminate the failure and get back on track, it will ruin them. It will bring the judgment of Christ and the end of their usefulness to Christ. It is essential that they get back on track.

This is an important lesson. We must not be like a school child who thinks that because his grade in reading is good his failure in math is of no importance. It all goes together. Specifically, here is a church that had failed to keep two essential things together. In their zeal for truth, they had forgotten love. That had lost "the love they had at first." Their founding Apostle had not so instructed them. He had written to them among other things:

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

"That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie

in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even Christ*" (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Beyond this they had been taught by the Apostle John, the Apostle of love; yet they have gotten off track at that very point. In their zealous pursuit of truth, in their exercise of discipline in favor of truth, they had forgotten to act in love. This failure would be fatal if not corrected. The good news is that correction and restoration is possible.

III. Resolution

The counsel given them by Christ in verse 5 is my principle reason for taking this text. Its importance lies in the formula it gives for spiritual restoration. None of us get through life unscathed. The Christian life should be an upward ascending line, but it is not a straight line. All of us, for one reason or another, get off track. What is important is to recognize that we are, and to know how to end our wandering and find our way back to where we should be. No one can better tell us how to do that than our Lord, Jesus Christ, himself. He does so here in one precise sentence that contains three verbs denoting three essential actions for spiritual restoration: "Remember", "Repent", "Redo". This is a sure and simple formula that we must so ingrain into our thinking that it becomes constantly available to us as we navigate our way through the dangers of the present life.

A. Remember

Specifically he tells these Ephesian Christians to remember from where they have fallen. When we have once done something right, we can never again be fully satisfied with anything less. It is true that we can stumble through life always doing it wrong without realizing there is a better way, but once we have experienced the better way, all lesser ways will be frustrating. This is true in every domain of life. We experience it in an act as simple as cutting with a sharp knife. Once you know how a truly sharp knife cuts, anything less will be a frustration and an irritation. What is important here is having that memory, a point of reference to look back to by which we judge all similar experiences.

This church had experienced genuine Christian love. They knew what it was to have the love of God poured out in their midst by the Holy Spirit. They knew what it was to love one another as Christ had loved them. The memory was there. They needed only recall it as a point of reference by which to judge their present experience. Once they did, they would know that they had fallen from where they had been, that something was amiss.

B. Repent

To repent is to admit that you are off track; that you have taken a wrong turn; that you are going in the wrong direction. For us this word has a primarily religious meaning, but for the original recipients of this letter it meant simply to have a change of mind or a change of heart. It occurs in that moment when we remember how things are supposed to be and we compare them with how they are, and we say to ourselves: “this isn’t right.” It is the Prodigal Son “coming to himself”. The moment we really do come to ourselves; the moment we admit that we have fallen from where we were, we are no longer content to remain in the far country feeding swine.

Sometimes we think that repentance is something that occurs only once in our lives, the moment we are converted. It is true that there is a repentance that leads to life. It is the moment we turn from whatever illusions we lived by to “worship the true and living God.” It is a repentance “never to be repented of”. But in the normal Christian life this is not the only repentance. Every time we “fall from where we were”, to get back to where we were, we must go through the process our Lord lays down in this text of remembering, repenting, and redoing. Once we have experienced a certain measure of the grace of God, we should never again be content to live at a lower level.

The spiritual life is not like the physical life. Physically we reach a highpoint fairly early in life and then we begin to decline. We can remember from whence we have fallen. We can even regret it, but we cannot always repent and redo. But if our outward man is perishing, the inward man is being renewed day by day. There should be no inevitable final decline in the spiritual life. There will be momentary failures, but these failures need not be fatal, because the door of repentance is always open. We need only remember, repent, and then we can redo.

C. Redo

The cycle of restoration is completed by redoing. Jesus says to this Ephesian Church: “Do things the way you were doing them at first.” This was a church where love had ruled, but in their zeal for truth its members had strayed from the command of their Lord to “love one another as I have loved you.” Their fall is understandable, but fortunately it is not fatal. The way of restoration is open. They need to pause for a moment and remember how things were when they were right. They, then, need to come to themselves and admit that they have taken a

wrong turn. Once we admit that we have taken a wrong turn, the only way to get back on the right road is turn around and go back to where we went wrong and continue on the right road.

Conclusion:

Historically, we know that this message was heeded; that this church listened to the words of Christ. He did not have to come and remove their lamp. In the second and subsequent centuries Ephesus became a major center of Christianity from which missionaries went throughout the Roman Empire taking the good news of Christ. But the warning of Christ in this passage is real. We must never delay to get back on course. Life is not always easy. It is filled with pitfalls, and they will cause all of us to fall, but no fall need be permanent. Christ has provided for our restoration. Remember where you were when things were right. Admit that where you are is not where you should be. Return to where you were and do things the way you were doing them when things were right. This is Christ's way of spiritual restoration.