

EPHESUS: GUARD YOUR LOVE!

SERIES: JESUS: LORD OF HIS CHURCH

by Ron Ritchie

About a year and a half ago I was invited to speak in a very nice church in another town. This church is well known in this country for having many fine programs for their members and the community at large. My assignment was to address the subject of Jesus and his bride, the church. The fellowship hall was filled with people. After some very nice music, I rose to speak and immediately asked the congregation to open their Bibles to Ephesians 5. There was a dead silence. I could sense that everyone was embarrassed. There were no Bibles. It wasn't that they didn't have Bibles; they just hadn't thought of bringing them to this meeting, even though the study topic had been announced in advance. One of the leaders then remembered that there were some Bibles in a nearby closet and passed them out to all who wanted them. Finally, our study began.

Time and time again I have been invited to speak at churches where the people are busy for Jesus, but have very little time to develop their relationship with him. Two weeks ago I taught in another church on a Sunday evening, which was their main teaching hour. After some fine music, I stood up to teach about Jesus and his ministry of reconciliation. I began by asking the people to open their Bibles to 2 Corinthians 5. Once again, silence. I discovered that few, if any, had brought a Bible. Later I read their bulletins and talked to their leaders, and I learned that they had many wonderful programs to serve their people and reach out to their community. The leaders eventually admitted, however, that the people did not really know the Scriptures and the Lord Jesus. It became very clear that they had "abandoned their first love."

Stories like these are far too common in this country. The bride of Christ, the church, is becoming more and more involved with activities, programs, meetings, or the latest cause. As a result of all this activity, there appears to be little time left for her to develop a love relationship with her husband, Jesus Christ. From the outside, it appears that the church is forsaking her first love for religious activity.

We are going to begin our study about the relationship our Lord desires to have with his bride, the church. He is going to evaluate seven churches that were established along the postal route on the west coast of Turkey. Our first stop is the church in the city of Ephesus.

The church of Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7:

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.

John, the last living apostle, was ministering in the city of Ephesus, Turkey at the end of the first century. He was one of the leading elders in that church. Christians were coming under fire from the Roman government because they would not bow to Caesar as lord and god. This religious resistance cost many Christians in the Roman Empire their homes, jobs, and at times their lives. John was no exception: Because of his testimony for Jesus Christ, he too was arrested and placed on the forsaken island of Patmos some fifty miles off the coast of Ephesus. It was while John was on this island that he came face to face with Jesus for the first time in sixty years. As a young man, he had known Jesus in his humanity as a good friend. He had ministered with him, eaten with him, suffered with him, and rejoiced in his resurrection and ascension into heaven. But now as an old man, John was confronted by Jesus in his full glory and power.

He was awesome to behold: "Someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes

were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance" (Revelation 1:13-16). John saw his Messiah, his Prophet, his High Priest, the fully glorified bridegroom in all his purity, power and majesty standing ready as the righteous judge to evaluate his bride, the church.

John was so overwhelmed by the power and beauty of his fully glorified Lord that he fell to the ground as if dead (Revelation 1:17). But at that very same moment the glorified Lord Jesus demonstrated that he had remained the "good shepherd" of Psalm 23 and John 10. "Then he placed his right hand on me and said, 'Do not be afraid.'" (Stop being afraid.) John was no doubt comforted by this very familiar voice. Jesus continued, "I am the First and the Last" (Revelation 1:17). I am the risen Messiah, the Son of God, the eternal one, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. All of life, past, present and future is in my sovereign power. (See Isaiah 41:4, 44:6; Rev. 22:13.) "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!" (Revelation 1:18). My death was for the sin of fallen man and my resurrection opened the door to eternal life for all who would place their faith in me as their Lord and savior. As I am alive forevermore so shall they be alive forevermore. "And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:18). Because of his resurrection, Jesus now has ultimate power and authority over death and Hades (the place where non-believers go after their physical death to await their final judgment. [Revelation 20:13]), and no one has to experience either if they place their faith in him as Lord (Hebrews 2:14-15). He also has the sovereign power to offer the gift of eternal life to all who place their faith in him now.

John then heard his Lord say, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (Revelation 1:19). Jesus wanted John to write a letter to each of the seven churches previously mentioned (Revelation 1:11). These seven churches were a symbol of completeness. That is, what Jesus will say to the individual believers in these seven churches is all that is necessary for him to say to every believer in every generation until he comes again. The whole prophecy, the "unveiling," will be about things the apostle saw (Christ in his full glory) and heard (letters to the churches), and the future events in the great tribulation, millenium, new heaven, and new earth. In the immediate context, the Lord will evaluate his bride with words of encouragement, exhortation, admonishment and promise.

After commanding John to write, Jesus reveals part of the mystery: "The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches." The word angels in Greek (angelos) can mean a good or evil spiritual being, like Gabriel, Michael or Satan. In certain contexts, angel can also be translated into the English word "messenger." Some scholars think that these angels were the "senior pastor" of each church mentioned, but we already know that the early churches were ruled by a group of elders. (See Acts 20:25-31). Other scholars assert that these messengers were men who visited John on Patmos and took their copy of the Revelation scroll back to their respective congregations to read aloud. Still others believe that these were real angels who carried the message to the churches.

There is a solid basis for the latter view. The book of Revelation contains over sixty references to angelic beings serving God in some manner. At no time is the term "angel" applied to a man or a woman. Jewish believers were very familiar with the concept of guardian angels being placed over nations (Daniel 10:13, 20-21), particularly Israel (Daniel 12:1). Jesus taught the disciples that children have guardian angels (Matthew 18:10). And Peter was released from prison by an angel (Acts 12:6-10). The question remains: Would Jesus rebuke the guardian angels for the sins of the people? It is unclear! Perhaps the guardian angels are to ensure that the seven messengers succeed in carrying the message of Revelation to the seven churches.

Then the Lord explained to John, "and the seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20). The church becomes the lampstand to uphold Jesus as the "Light of the World," shining forth the good news of redemption in a very dark world. That is why we are here, in this particular community. Jesus said that we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:15).

Now we come to Jesus' message to the first church, in Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman province of Asia. With its harbor, agora, theaters, public baths, library, paved streets, and temples, Ephesus met the needs of traders and travelers alike. With three official temples, the city

was also the center of the Roman emperor cult. The Greeks had built the largest temple, which in time became known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple housed an image of the goddess Artemis (also known as the Roman goddess Diana), which the Greeks believed had fallen from heaven (see Acts 19:35). The Jews had a large colony in Ephesus and had long enjoyed a privileged place under its Roman masters. Mystery religions which trafficked in magic and demons were also prevalent in this city. And it was to this city that the apostle Paul and his disciples came to minister in 53 AD. Over a period of three years he not only built a church within the city, but established several others in the surrounding area (see Acts 19). In 62 AD, Paul wrote his Ephesian letter to encourage those believers. After Paul's death at the hand of Rome, Timothy, Apollos, and later John traveled to Ephesus to minister to that church. In 95-96 AD, our glorified Lord Jesus appeared to John and told him that the spiritual evaluation would begin with him as one of the elders, and the people of God under his spiritual care in Ephesus.

"These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." The Greek word for hold (*kratein*) is a strong word, denoting Jesus' ability to place his hand around all seven churches at once. He has the power to grasp or hold fast his churches with total control. None of them slips through his fingers. He holds them in his right hand, the hand of power and of rule. It also means that the church that submits to his control will be continually secured and purified by his loving care.

Jesus also says he "walks among" the churches. Jesus patrols the grounds of his churches and is on the spot when needed. We are assured that he will protect and guide us in this dark world. An awareness of this truth is so needed in the churches of the United States today. We are living as if Jesus is working in China or Brazil, but is too busy to work in the United States. We are a church that lives in fear of the world and the devil. We are circling the wagons and acting like we hate the sin and the sinner. As a result, we are losing our salt and our light in our immediate communities and in this nation. We need to return to the spiritual reality that Jesus is Lord of his church, he holds us firmly in his hand and walks among us moment by moment.

At this point, the church of Ephesus needed the Lord's evaluation, because they had become swallowed up in duty rather than love for their husband. Now our sovereign and fully glorified Lord Jesus begins to speak words of encouragement, correction, exhortation and promise to the Ephesian believers.

A word of encouragement

Revelation 2:2-3:

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. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Jesus first addresses their religious activity: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." "I know" (*oida*), Jesus says, in the sense that I have full divine knowledge of your individual lives. He knew the motives behind all their activity within the body of Christ and the community. This is the type of knowledge David wrote about in Psalm 139:1-3; 23-24: "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.... Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

"I know your deeds...." These dear believers were living out the fulfillment of Paul's words written some thirty years earlier. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). These Christians were not working for the Lord with the hope of gaining salvation; rather, these good works were the fruit of their salvation. Their personal responsibility was to choose by the power of the Holy Spirit to buy up the many opportunities God placed before them each day of their new life in Christ. "I know your hard work," the labor which makes you sweat and feel weary in body. "I know your perseverance." The Lord Jesus knew about the political and social pressures as well as the spiritual warfare these believers were experiencing within the wicked city of Ephesus, yet they were able by the power of the Spirit to abide under, to bear up courageously in the midst of this stress

with grace. No one else could have such intimate insight into a church.

I know about your pure lives, Jesus says. "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men." The city of Ephesus was filled with wicked men and women. These folks were involved in the sexual immorality which was part and parcel of the religious activity in the temple of Artemis. Many citizens of Ephesus trafficked in magic, witchcraft and demonic activities. Paul addressed these issues in his letter to the first generation of believers in that city: "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person---such a man is an idolater---has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret" (Ephesians 5:3-12). This almost sounds like today's newspaper! Not much has changed in the hearts of men and women who rebel against God.

In addition to being involved in religious activity and living pure lives, the Ephesian believers were correcting false doctrine. "I know that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false." The early church had been overrun by false prophets, messiahs, teachers and apostles. The church had certain ways to test or examine those con artists. First, according to Peter, a true apostle had to have been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry on earth to his resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). In addition, Paul told the Corinthians that the marks of a true apostle were "signs, and wonders and miracles" (2 Corinthians 12:12). Paul also warned the same folks to watch out for those who teach a different Jesus, spirit or gospel (2 Corinthians 11:4). This is why when someone tells me they believe in Jesus, I ask, "Which one? There are so many!" As Paul warned his readers: "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). Satan is so good at his deception. How can you spot the counterfeit if you don't know the real? And how will you know the real Jesus, unless you spend time with him?

Jesus continues, "You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." You have held tight to your faith, Jesus encourages them, in the midst of severe attacks from the government, the surrounding community as well as some within the church. You have endured hardships and mocking because you bowed your heart to Jesus as your Lord instead of giving in to the pressure to worship the Roman and Greek gods and goddesses. In the midst of all this personal affliction, this daily stress, you have grown physically, emotionally and spiritually weary as you sought ways to serve me with good works that I place before you.

The Ephesian Bible Church is humming. The calendar is full of spiritual activities, the people are in the world but not of it, the elders are dealing with the false apostles based on correct doctrine and the congregation is keeping the faith despite political opposition, social oppression and spiritual warfare. After reading this passage, I was emotionally and spiritually exhausted. These were busy people with hardly a moment for family members or friends. They no doubt rushed around like the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland crying, "I'm late, I'm late for a very important date. No time to say hello, good-bye---I'm late, I'm late, I'm late!"

Jesus moved from a word of encouragement to

A word of correction

Revelation 2:4:

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

"Yet I hold this against you." You can almost hear the sigh! You have certainly been busy doing good works in these difficult days in which we are living. You have been faithful to confront wicked men and false apostles

without growing weary. But in the midst of all those good activities, those good projects, and those good examinations, you let the main thing slip away. You allowed spiritual activity to replace your love for your husband.

In the context of the Old Testament, God is the husband of his bride Israel (Jeremiah 2:2). In the New Testament, Jesus is the husband of his bride the church (Ephesians 5:21-33, Revelation 22:17). When Paul wrote to the Ephesians some thirty years earlier, he taught about Christ and his bride and he was thrilled about how much the Ephesians loved Jesus Christ and each other because he loved them first. The believers in this church loved Jesus with the same intensity as a young bride loves her new husband. In the very last verse of Ephesians (6:24), Paul blessed this church with the words: "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible" (NASB), "with an undying love" (NIV), or "an unfailing love" (Phillips). Some of these dear new Christians loved the Lord God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their strength and with all their mind, but over time they became seduced by spiritual activity and abandoned their love relationship with their husband Jesus. First the bride's passionate love for her husband cooled, then that love was replaced by a love of doing things for him rather than with him. In time, the bride forsook the relationship and gave her heart over to another love: religious activity. At that point, Jesus had to step in to offer a path of correction, for he could see that their activities, discipline, and testing of doctrine were being done without love for him. These activities became as just so much noise, "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). In just thirty years they had fallen from the peak of undying love for their husband to the valley of abandonment.

The key to having an undying love for Jesus as our husband is to stay in touch with him in the same way he stayed in touch with his Father. He told his disciples that he did not do anything, say anything or go anywhere without first checking in with his Father. His will, he told them, was to please his Father and do his will in heaven on earth (see John 6:38). He hungers for us to have that same oneness with him.

I recently had breakfast with a young man who is a doctoral student at Stanford University. Right in middle of our meal he said with a big smile and twinkling eyes, "You know, I am a new Christian and I'm growing in the Lord. I am so happy about the ways the Lord is changing my life. I really just want to serve him." He went on to share all the good things that the Lord was doing in his heart. His story was so refreshing and it was clear he was truly in love with Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke a word of encouragement, a word of correction and then

A word of exhortation

Revelation 2:5-6:

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. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

"Remember the height from which you have fallen!" Our eternal husband admonishes us to willingly choose to return to him as our first love. He begins with two commands, one warning and one compliment. You cannot go forward in your relationship with your husband until you go back to the place where you stepped off the path of love and fell into the sea of religious activity and almost drowned. Think back to the time when you fell in love with Jesus. Do you remember how dead you had been in your sin, how you had been held in the power of Satan? Do you remember the day you turned to Jesus in the midst of your spiritual bankruptcy and he accepted you and placed you into an eternal relationship with him? Do you remember that he gave you the gift of eternal life and the person and power of the Holy Spirit who would enable you to live out your new life with him? Do you remember the thrill of living every hour of every day for him and him alone? Do you remember how you sang to him and spoke of him to anyone who would listen? Do you remember? Well, the truth of the matter is you have fallen out of love with Jesus and fallen in love with religious activity. The only way back into your love relationship with your husband is to go back to the place where you have fallen and...

"Repent and do the things you did at first." Turn around 180 degrees and begin anew to spend time with your

husband as you did in the early days of your love relationship. Have times of intimate communication with him. Spend time reading what he has written through Moses and the prophets, through the psalms and the apostles, in order to really understand and know him. It will be like looking through his baby book, high school year book and his family album. Stop wandering off and abandoning your first love and come home to be warmly welcomed by your husband. Once your love relationship is restored, you will discover that you desire to return to doing good works out of a heart filled with love for your husband rather than a love for spiritual activity.

Jesus then warns about the consequences of disobeying these two commands. "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." The church of Ephesus was called a lampstand which held aloft the fully glorified Lord Jesus Christ. He is "the Light of the World" that continues to offer the light of redemption to a fallen humanity struggling to see the truth in a very dark world. If the bride did not go back where she had fallen off the cliff and then repent of her sin and return to him, her lampstand would be removed. The city then would be left in spiritual darkness, and her ministry of love and truth would be removed.

Jesus concludes with a compliment: "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Revelation 2:6). Within the Ephesian church there was a group of people called the Nicolaitans, founded by a man named Nicolaos (in Greek Nicolaos means destroyer of the people). They were leading the Christian community to sin in the areas of idolatry and sexual immorality. We will study this cult further when we come to the church in Pergamum. The Ephesian believers hated the sins of the Nicolaitans, but they did not hate the sinners. The believers were able to share the truth of Jesus with the Nicolaitans without becoming involved in their sin.

Last September Anne Marie and I spent our vacation in southern Spain. We rented a little house by the beach and brought several books that we hoped would help us slow down from the many spiritual activities and demands of our ministries. I personally did not realize how close I had come to "forsaking my first love" until I began to read a book called *Devotional Classics* .. For this book, Richard J. Foster gathered devotional writings from some fifty spiritual giants spanning the course of church history. He included essays from St. Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Hannah Smith, C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The book was designed to help weary Christians read with the heart and be spiritually renewed in their love for Jesus Christ. It took me a month to slow down, to renew my love for Jesus and begin to serve him again with a new heart. I kept struggling with the thought, "There must be something I should be doing!"

Jesus spoke a word of encouragement, a word of correction, a word of exhortation, and finally

A word of promise

Revelation 2:7:

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.

Jesus calls the Ephesian believers to listen to the Spirit: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." It is the Holy Spirit who speaks the truth of Jesus. It is important, Jesus says, for the second generation of Christians in Ephesus to listen to the words of their fully glorified husband. Listen to him because his truth is the difference between life and death, now and for eternity.

Those who want to restore their relationship with Jesus are given the hope that they will taste life as Jesus defines it. Once we repent from sin, he invites us to enjoy the fruit of the Tree of Life, which is the life of Christ himself. This tree was first revealed in the Garden of Eden on earth and it will be seen again in the new Jerusalem. The fruit of this tree gives believers the love and joy that can come only from a genuine relationship with Jesus---the love and joy of abundant life now and into eternity (John 17:3 and Rev. 22:2). This promise was given by Jesus as a husband to his bride the church with the hope that the Ephesians, through the truth and power of the Holy Spirit, would be restored to their passionate love for Jesus.

Some Questions to Consider

Do you think at this moment that your life is so full of spiritual activity that you are on the verge of "forsaking your first love," or have you already abandoned him?

Do you want to restore your love relationship with Jesus Christ?

If so, then by the power of the Holy Spirit, remember where you have fallen, repent and come back to the place where you used to spend so much time with him. That restored love relationship will enable you to continue to be a lampstand that lifts Jesus up as the "Light of the World," the truth of redemption in a very dark society.

Let's get back to making the main thing the main thing: May the world see that we are in love with Jesus Christ and may godly activity flow from that love and bring blessing to all who come near us.

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Revelation 2:1-7
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