When the Thrill is Gone
Selected Scriptures
1283

I want to draw our attention as we think on our communion service tonight to just a text in the second chapter of Revelation that I'd like us to look at for just a brief few moments. I only intend for this to be a focus for us that I think is so very needful.

Grace Church continually is a burden on my heart. I don't know any conscious waking moments without some lingering thought of the responsibility here. It is a way of life for me...whether I'm awake or asleep. I have a great concern and desire for our church. I concern myself often in prayer over the things I think Satan is attempting to do to destroy, to undermine, take away our power and testimony.

And recently I have been especially concerned in a certain area, certain dimension that has just been on my heart. And it's a concern that our Lord had as well. So I don't feel particularly that this is just my feeling. The Lord sensed this in another church and wrote about it in the second chapter of Revelation. In Revelation chapter 2 and 3 you have the Lord writing letters to seven churches. These are seven real churches. They existed in the land of Asia Minor in seven genuine cities. And though they are each individual churches on their own, they are, in a sense, representative of types of churches. In fact, you can look at a church and almost fit it into one or another of these sort of model churches. And I guess as I thought about it, Grace Community Church seemed at this point in some ways to be like the church at Ephesus.

In the first chapter of Revelation, verses 12 and following, the Lord is moving among the churches...it's a vision there. The seven golden lampstands or candlesticks of verse 12 are the seven churches. And the Lord is moving amidst these lampstands, the Son of Man. And He's doing His work. He's dressed in the garments of a priest, the garments of a prophet, the garments of a monarch. And as He moves amidst the churches, He finds out what they need. And having discerned that in chapter 1, He then pens seven letters in chapter 2 and 3.

The first one comes to the church at Ephesus. Look at verse 1, "Unto the messenger," the word angel is also translatable as messenger, could refer to the pastor of that church, "Under the messenger 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, or lampstands." In other words, I have a message that I want to give to the church at Ephesus. Write this message down.

Now the church at Ephesus was a tremendous church. It had been founded by the Apostle Paul Himself. In the nineteenth chapter of the book of Acts we find the story of how that church was founded. It says in verse 1, "It came to pass that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper borders came to Ephesus." And once he had come there, verse 8 says, "He went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the Kingdom of God. Some were hardened and believed not and spoke evil of that

way before the multitude and he departed from them and separated the disciples, disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus." So for months he was in the synagogue and they resisted and he moved next door to the school of Tyrannus and there he continued for two years so that all they who dwelt in Asia heard the Word of the Lord Jesus both Jews and Gentiles.

He literally reached the entire area of Asia Minor. And in fact the other six churches were probably founded as a result of the impact he had in Ephesus. People were so excited about what was being heard in Ephesus that they touched all these other cities and the seven churches of Asia Minor were born as a result of it.

While there was a riot, for sure, to follow, there was a revival at the same time. In fact, it was the revival that caused the riot. It says in verse 18, "Many believed, came, confessed and showed their deeds and they burned their magic books and they dumped out their idols and they began to follow the Lord and mightily grew the Word of God and prevailed." And, of course, this caused a riot among the pagans.

So what do we know from the church at Ephesus? Well, it was founded by the Apostle Paul and he spent more time there than he spent anywhere else so they really had a solid foundation. They were a missionary church that actually founded six other churches. They grew in the Word of God profoundly and multiplied. They were a large church. They understood adversity because there was a riot. They withstood that riot and they grew anyway. The church was born with power. The church was born with dynamic. The church was born and strengthened in adversity from the very beginning. And Paul says in chapter 20 that for the space of three years he warned them night and day with tears. And he says I gave them the whole counsel of God, everything. And Paul was succeeded there by Timothy. And Apollos preached there, the greatest of all orators of the Old Testament. And Aquila and Priscilla were there. They had the cream of the crop as pastors and leaders, they had the Word of God. They had Paul longer than anybody had Paul. They were really the church that had the best beginning, the best foundation.

And the Lord begins by commending them, look at verse 2, "I know thy works, I know thy works." That's a general statement. I am well aware of what you've done. I am well aware of what you are doing. I am well aware of where you stand. I am well aware of your productivity. In fact, He pinpoints several things, let me suggest to you the things for which they are commended. And I want to draw some parallels.

First of all, "I know thy works, even thy labor." That was service...service. The risen Christ praises them for their service, for their hard work, kopos. The characteristic of that word is that it describes labor to the point of exhaustion, the kind of toil that takes everything that mind and muscle can put into it. It's a very common word in the New Testament, the verb form is kopiaoand I've suggested that to you on many occasions, it means to work very hard. He says, "I know your service, you have worked hard for the Lord. You've been diligent."

I mean, this is not a church full of spectators, this is not a church full of Christians who want the box seats, you know. This is not the kind of a church where the people come and say, "Entertain me. Feed me while I watch." This is not the kind of congregation that wants to eat the harvest but doesn't want a thing to do with the planting and the caring of the crop while it grows. These are not weak sisters. These people are hard workers.

They were very much like Grace Church is. They worked hard. They ministered. They shared. They built. They taught. They discipled. They prayed. They called on people. They served people. They used their gifts. They worked hard at it like we do.

Secondly, He says, "I not only know your labor but I know your steadfastness, not only service but steadfastness." Look at verse 2, He says, "And your patience," hupomone, means steadfastness, steadfast endurance. I mean, you not only work but you keep working, you're not a flash in the pan, you know. You're not a comet, you're not a shooting star, burns up a lot of energy real quick, here and gone. You stay with it. You have a positive persistence. I mean, month after month and year after year you're going at it. It is not some grim resignation but it is a courageous gallantry that's bound up in the word hupomone. You just take hardship and suffering and loss and difficulty and you just plow right on through that and turn it in to grace and glory. You move ahead. You don't bail out. You don't quit...not Ephesus. A lot like Grace.

I thank God for this fellowship and for the people who are so faithful year after year, doing the work. And the going gets tough and they just go right on through in the power of the Spirit of God, faithful. They're like those that Paul referred to when he said, "Always abounding in the work of the Lord," and the word literally means to overdo it...the people who overdo it and just stay at it. Lots of people will sign up initially but not a lot will follow through. And, you know, I talk to pastors all the time who get people started on something but everybody kind of peters out somewhere along the line. That isn't true here. People are faithful. They hang in there. And they keep serving. Steadfastness.

Thirdly, the Lord commends them for their suppression of evil. Their service, their steadfastness and their suppression of evil, verse 2, it says, "And I know how thou canst not bear them who are evil." You don't tolerate sin. You don't tolerate evil. You're very sensitive to the devastating presence of sin in the fellowship, you deeply resent evil for the damage it does to the testimony of the church and you deal with it. You hate what is immoral. You hate what is ungodly. You hate what is carnal and fleshly. You discipline, you preach against sin, you act against sin, you deny it a place, you discipline those who don't respond and repent. You can't bear what's evil. I mean, you're pure. You don't tolerate any of that stuff.

So here's a church that was commended for its service, its steadfastness and its suppression of evil. And again it's very much like our church. We don't tolerate sin here. We deal with it. We preach against it. We hate it. We pray against it. We deny it a place. We discipline. We guard against it because we know how destructive it is. We don't play footsie with immorality.

There's a fourth thing for which He commends them. Their spiritual discernment. Look again at verse 2, "You have tried them who say they are apostles and are not and found them liars." I mean, you've even got your doctrinal act so together that you can spot a phony a mile away. You know exactly what you believe and you don't compromise what you believe. If somebody comes along and says they're an apostle, that is a sent one from God, you'll find out because you know true doctrine and you have found them out and found them to be liars.

Now this is really amazing because, you see, the Ephesian church is a first generation bunch. I mean, they were born not in a traditional orthodoxy. I mean, they were born in the very heart of paganism. One of the seven wonders of the world was a Temple of Diana or Artemis and it was in

the city of Ephesus. It was the most sacred place in the ancient Greco-Roman world because Artemis or Diana was the most sacred goddess in the ancient Greco-Roman world. It was an incredible temple. It had an altar in it. It had a sanctuary for criminals so Ephesus was just crawling with criminals. It provided prostitutes, orgies, priestesses, idols, mutilations, sex perversion, you name it, it all went on there.

And this church was not raised in a hot bed of orthodoxy. This church was not orthodox by birth and it was not orthodox by denominational creed. And it wasn't orthodox by being in the right environment. It was orthodox because Paul had poured so much of his life into it. And they listened, they heard it. And Ephesus was careful and Paul had said to them on his last visit, "Grevious wolves shall enter in...right?...not sparing the flock." They're going to come in and try to tear you up, false teachers, false prophets, be warned. They took that warning. They could spot them. They had doctrinal purity. And only those teachers were welcome who had proven faithful to the Word of God in life and in doctrine.

Very much like Grace Church, isn't it? We don't tolerate false doctrine being taught. Nobody can teach here unless they adhere to the faith in their life and their teaching. We have some doctrinal distinctives. We guard against false teaching. And we demand purity of doctrine, just like they did.

Service, steadfastness, suppression of evil, spiritual discernment...they were also marked by sacrifice.

Look at what it says in verse 3, it says, "And thou hast borne and hast patience for My namesake hast labored and hast not fainted." Hast borne, what does that mean? You've endured. And here the idea is you've gone through rejection, persecution and you didn't faint and you didn't quit, you didn't even grow weary. There was no sign of departure. Nobody wanted to quit, you were willing to pay the price. Why? For My namesake. You know what that means? They wanted to glorify God no matter what. Oh my, what a good church.

I mean, the focus of our church has always been that, to God be the glory, hasn't it? And we want to glorify God no matter what the sacrifice. I mean, people have probably said to you, "Do you go to that church where that kook John MacArthur preaches?" We've endured attacks in the newspapers, repeated ones. We've endured law suits. We've endured accusations. We've endured threats from the Jewish Defense League to blow up our church on Sunday morning. We've been maligned by the system. But you've been faithful, maybe you didn't know that now you're wondering whether you ought to leave. We've hung in there. You've made sacrifices.

People have accused us of being a church where there's mind control, where people kill themselves, where there are a bunch of fanatics. Church filled with a bunch of chauvinists. And we've all hung in there just like Ephesus did.

They were also commended for one other thing, and I think this is important, too. They were commended for their separation. Verse 6, "This thou hast that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate."

There was a man named Nicholas, may well have been an early deacon who went bad or somebody by the name of Nicholas who was a heretic. And apparently his activity was associated with false

doctrine but more so with immorality, with evil, ungodliness, extreme indulgence, uncleanness. Clement of Alexander commenting on it said, "They abandoned themselves to pleasure like goats, leading a life of self-indulgence." And the Lord says to the church at Ephesus, "You hate that just like I do."

What does He mean by that? Well He means basically you are separated from such groups that are not spiritual and scriptural. You don't let those kind of groups have a relationship with you. Boy, that sounds like us. You know, when we choose to work with a mission agency or when we choose to support some ministry somewhere or some group somewhere, we will not support any group that does not hold up the authority of the Word of God and teach it truly. We won't compromise. We would say, "Oh well, you know, they're only off a little here and over there." No. This church is much like our church...service, steadfastness, suppression of evil, spiritual discernment, sacrifice, separation, quite a church.

You say, "Well that kind of a church is just about invincible." Just about. But look at verse 4, "Nevertheless," boy, what a word, "Nevertheless," in spite of all of that, "I have something against you because you have left your first...what?...love."

Wait a minute, can this happen in a church that's busy with people who serve, a church that's busy with people who serve continuously, a church that will deal with sin, a church that is spiritually discerning about true doctrine, a church that is willing to make the sacrifice to stay true no matter what persecution comes, can this happen in a church that is separated from groups that teach false truth? Can this happen?

Yes it can. All the congratulations, then this...you left your first love. Whatever happened to your hot heart? Whatever happened to the passion? Whatever happened to the fire that was there? I mean, how did it all become sort of cold orthodoxy? How did it become routine or duty or performance? I mean, Ephesus actually left the heart out. I mean, they were cranking it out but there wasn't any heart there. As great a church as Ephesus was, listen to me, the thrill was gone...the thrill was gone. The honeymoon was over. Everything was perfunctory. They did all the right things, they believed all the right things coldly.

And I really sense in my heart, people, that Grace Church exists on the edge of this kind of potential problem. And I mean that. We're busy serving and we hang in there pretty tough and we know what we believe about sin and we know what we believe about doctrine and we're willing to make some sacrifices and we know where we'll separate from others but I really fear that we're so much like Ephesus everywhere else that we might be the ones that lose our first love. When you get as strong as we are, Satan is limited to what he can do and one of his best ploys is to take all of that orthodoxy and push it into a cold routine. No fire, no passion, no love, no thrill, I'm concerned about that. You've heard it so long, you've done it so long that you lose the fire. That's why I believe evangelism is so important in a church and it doesn't say one word about whether Ephesus was evangelistic. And I kind of fell that that's the fatal flaw because where you're out there on the front lines winning people to Jesus Christ, those new fresh converts to Christ pump the new life, the fire and the passion into the church. Well it's so easy, you know. You've been a Christian a long time, you just show up on Sunday, flop, get up, split, very little happens. Maybe you crank out your class but the thrill is gone.

You say, "Well, do you think that's happening?" I think it's happening in some of your lives, yes I do. I think I can sense that. If I've learned anything in twelve years it's to be able to hopefully in the power

of the Spirit to read the signs, to sense things. The church to me is like an individual, it has a personality and I have interfaced with that personality so long that I think I can read the mood of that personality. I see a lot of fire on the edges but I wonder whether there's some coldness at the center.

Well, if there's one place we ought to light the fire again it's right here at the Lord's table, right? If you can't get thrilled and you can't get excited about the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins, then, boy, you really are in bad shape. I mean, if you're so cold that you've lost all the passion, this is the place to kind of ignite it again. And let me suggest how.

What is the remedy? Verse 5, first, "Remember," you see it there? "Remember...remember therefore from where you're fallen." Just look back, just remember. Do you remember how it was when the Spirit of God lit the first fire in your heart? Do you remember the love-filled days when the thrills were coming a mile a minute? You see, defection spiritually always begins with forgetting and Ephesus was now into the second generation and the first generation zeal was gone. And Christ knows that the cooling of first love is the forerunner to spiritual apathy. And you know where the church of Ephesus is today? There is no church. There is no Ephesus. Gone. The candle went out.

The end of verse 5 says, "I'll remove your lampstand," and He did. It happened to them, it could happen to us. It could happen right here. Do you realize that in one moment of time if your hearts turned cold this thing could be over, I could be gone and who knows what would happen here...who knows? Remember, remember those early days, the days of excitement, the days when you sacrificed, the days when you couldn't get here fast enough, the days when you reached out, the days when you were discovering your spiritual gift and you were so hungry to use it, the day when the Bible first began to make sense to you, the day when you understood communion for the first time with God and you began to pray and it was a thrill. Remember when you had a burning zeal and you were faithful in your Bible study and faithful in your prayer life and faithful in attending. Remember.

Second word, "And repent," and repent. You see, if you've forgotten, that's a sin. Coldness is a sin. I mean, if you can take it or leave it, if you're here because it was convenient, repent...repent. I would like the city of Los Angeles to see a church so on fire that they wouldn't be able to deal with this. I wish every time we met together we were spilling out all over this community. And then when we left here there was so much fire we burned a trail back to our houses. Repent, coldness is a sin.

Third word, "And do the first works." I call that repeat, remember then repent then repeat. Remember when you couldn't miss a service even on Sunday night, when you would never miss a class on Sunday morning to go out to breakfast with somebody? Remember when you prayed every day? Remember when you gave sacrificially? You didn't have as much then and you weren't as enticed by the possibilities of your economics as you are now. Remember when every time there was a need for volunteers you showed up? Remember when you used to go to the hospital and call on the sick and the hurting? Remember when you taught a class of little girls or little boys? Remember when you felt the church couldn't make it unless you were faithful? Remember when you spent time every day studying the Word of God, reading a book or listening to a tape and it was so exciting and so fresh? Remember when you only had a little but your friend had less and so you gave your little to your friend because sharing was such a blessing? And when you've remembered, then repent and repeat and do what you used to do.

Ephesus never did that. And today it is desolate and unoccupied. The light went out. I pray, God, it

never happens here. Let's bow in prayer.

I know what the Lord is saying to my heart tonight. There's some things that I need to remember, believe me, some things I need to repeat, too. There were some thrills that I knew in those early years that maybe I've been missing lately. And I'm sure that's true in your lives. Don't let it get away from you any further. Spend a few moments in prayer and just take your heart to the Lord. If there's sin there, confess it. Repent, ask God to help you repeat those first works.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org

COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).