

One of the things I've often wondered following Easter is what those few weeks were like with Jesus after the resurrection and particularly after the ascension. We have some information on what those were like, but what we see throughout the book of Acts is this young community gathering of followers of "the Way" that was starting to realize and orient themselves to this new reality of Jesus resurrected, and that the new creation of the promised age to come had burst into the present.

For this young church, that meant their entire existence as a community had to take a new shape; everything about their identity had been changed. They were in a new era, and their entire lives would need to be organized around this new reality of the kingdom of God coming near. I would imagine it was a time of excitement mixed with chaos and confusion. It was an inflection point in which this community was going to take a new shape.

In one sense, the amount of change and chaos probably feels quite similar to our own moment. And like this group of Jesus followers who were adapting to their circumstances, this has been the work of followers of Jesus for every generation—to faithfully follow and arrange their lives according to the new reality that the Kingdom of God is available to us all, here and now.

I believe that this is one of the most challenging times to live out discipleship to Jesus in my lifetime; there are complexities going on culturally that pose so many challenges. But at the exact same time, I am incredibly hopeful about the future of the church. I am hopeful because the church, historically, has always done its greatest and most creative work when it has been in challenging circumstances.

So when we read the New Testament, we are reading internal dialogues and letters that are to these churches, these ekklesias, that are struggling to work out the implications of the resurrection in their context and in their time.

Revelations 2

Now, this is apocalyptic literature, which doesn't mean that there will be zombies and monsters and whatnot. A better understanding of apocalyptic literature is that of "unveiling." Apocalyptic literature is the moment when God pulls back the curtain so that we can understand what is really happening beneath the surface of reality. It is often challenging, scathing, and doesn't hold back from naming things as they are. Apocalyptic

literature provides a window into the present from the perspective of Heaven.

Now a bit of context before we go much further. Jesus is speaking to the church in Ephesus, and Ephesus was one of the biggest and most powerful cities in the Roman Empire. It was an urban center within the Roman world, and the letter is written to disciples trying to work out the implications of this newly formed resurrection community.

Ephesus was the center of:

Consumerism - Known as an economic juggernaut and epicenter of trade and economy.

Hedonism- It was centered around pleasure and sexual immorality, especially within its temple worship for its gods.

Entertainment - It was home to the Pannonian games, which were the second biggest sporting games, second only to the Olympics. If there was an ancient city that nears the environment in which we find ourselves in the Bay Area or simply a modern western urban environment, it would seem that Ephesus would be a likely equivalent.

You see, the cost for the Ephesians to remain faithful to the way of Jesus as his disciples was going to be high, and that is something they were going to have to wrestle with. If we are to follow Jesus in this day, in our moment, just like Paul and the Ephesians, it will cost us something.

This may mean prestige, power, position, and opportunity, but also time, re-ordered desires, etc. It will be a whole life re-orientation toward the kingdom of God and the life that is on offer in following Jesus with the very mundane day in and day out habits of training our hearts to be inclined toward God.

Revelation 2:1-7

Now, the text breaks down nicely into three sections that we will discuss in brief this morning.

vv. 2-3 - Opening Encouragements

vv. 4-6 - Direct Challenge

v. 7 - Invitation

First, it opens with encouragement by talking about the way this church had thrived. Second, it goes into a pretty blistering critique and challenge for the believers. Third, it is an invitation to the eternal kind of life in the kingdom of God.

Encouragement

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. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, 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. Revelation 2:1-3

Now, we don't have time to get into it but know that the first verse is referencing Jesus. We see this in chapter 1 of Revelation; Jesus is the one who holds the seven stars and is walking among the golden lampstands. And those lampstands represent their status as a church.

In verses 2-3, notice there are three areas of encouragement.

First Encouragement - Orthopraxy

The first encouragement is that Jesus recognizes their good practice, or good deeds, what we can call "orthopraxy," meaning right practice or living. Jesus says, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." The Ephesian church was living in light of and in accordance to the hope that they held. They were active in their work and efforts for the gospel. In response to the work of the gospel and this new community, it will necessitate and re-organize our actions and our living. This first encouragement is followed up by another.

Second Encouragement - Orthodoxy

The second encouragement is that this church in Ephesus has held to orthodoxy, to right belief. Jesus says to them, "you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false."

For the Ephesians, one of Paul's biggest concerns was that the church would be drawn away from the truth by various other stories and narratives about the world, gospels that were other than the Gospel of Jesus. In Acts 20, Paul is offering some last words to the church leaders in Ephesus before he departs, and there we see this exchange.

"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again...I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." - Acts 20:25, 29-31

Again, these are the parting words of Paul as he is leaving his church, "be on your guard."

The same is true today as it was in Ephesus. There are stories and narratives that will be preached that will deter us from the Kingdom of God. It is, therefore, the role of the church to continue to preach and maintain the centrality of the story of the gospel story, to differentiate between what is true and what is not true.

Third Encouragement - "...have not grown weary."

This then leads to the third encouragement; the Ephesian church has "persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." This Ephesian church was passionate about the kingdom of God. They were willing to endure the hardships and challenges that would come their way. Their passion for the Kingdom of God swelled up in an endurance against whatever came their way. They had endured and not grown weary.

This church has endured. We would be naive to consider that following Jesus won't require some endurance. The sheer fact that loving one another in a community of differences will require us to de-center ourselves and elevate the other. This in itself is a challenge, but the Ephesian church had endured, and we too can endure. As pastor and author Darrell Johnson once wrote, "Discipleship that costs nothing is worth precisely that."

Church, over the course of the past two years, I have been so proud to call you my church community. I look at how Jesus looks at the church in Ephesus with endearment and highlights the way they have persevered and endured hardships, and I can't help but think of how we, too, have endured hardships and persevered.

Where we are at CPC

When the pandemic hit and we went into lockdown, there were so many questions about what the future would hold. We knew God would continue to be faithful. We knew that we would face some challenges, but it has been a gift to watch this community rally together and maintain our commitment to the gospel through all that we have faced in the past two years.

What we see in this letter to the church in Ephesus is that they were at an inflection point or a turning point in their community. And while the circumstances are utterly different, there is a sense that where we are at now is a turning point or inflection point for us as well. In that same vein, I want to share with you a few areas of our community life that have been encouraging and some invitations for us as well. We want to let you know where we are at in a few key areas.

The Gathering

One of the great expressions of our commitment to our community has been the ability for us to engage together in hybrid environments. We have watched small groups connect deeply over Zoom, whether that was my four-year-old connecting with her CPCKids leaders or our WBS Tables and Men's Fraternity

communities gathering. We have broadcast services and preached to more cameras than I ever imagined. But through all of the dispersed locations, we have endured.

And now, since we opened our doors again this past year, we have seen a steady growth of people re-engaging with us in person while still recognizing that not everyone is ready to re-engage in person. We are grateful that you can still connect online. We believe that right now, we are somewhere around half to two-thirds back to our in-person gatherings and the remainder of our community is in a hybrid environment.

We believe deeply in the embodied gathered community of believers, and yet we fully recognize that for some of you, the particulars of your situation do not afford for this to be a safe option. That is okay. We welcome you to continue engaging online, but we also want you to know that when you are ready to return, we are ready to welcome you!

Serving

One of the realities of our re-gathering and trying to sustain both in-person and hybrid is that we have limited resources. And as we have re-opened rooms and ministries, we have found a need for people to join our ministry teams. In nearly all areas of our ministry, we are in need of people. This could be serving our church; this could be serving our community, or serving our world missions.

We are finding that many of these teams are being rebuilt as so much of the structure of our community has changed since the beginning of the pandemic. You can go to cpc.org/serve, where we have some simple forms you can fill out that will help you to find areas of our needs and get you plugged in.

Local Missions

As the past two years have presented so many challenges, it has also clearly presented several challenges for our surrounding community. It has been incredible to watch this community rally around those challenges and show up in many ways. Here are a few:

We have seen community groups provide a longstanding meal train to first responders at hospitals throughout the Bay Area. Provided countless meals to the homeless on a monthly basis through our partners at Street Life Ministries. We have moved over 200 veterans off the streets and into furnished apartments. Provided drive-through groceries through Samaritan House, and countless hygiene bags have been assembled and delivered to families living in shelters as well as low-income schools. Not to mention the amount of care we have seen between community group members and others across our church

Your faith has led to orthodoxy and orthopraxy, a genuine and beautiful embodiment of the Kingdom of God for our local

community in a time of need. Well done! What a gift this has been to watch so many of you step up!

Financial Outlook

I have been overwhelmed with how faithful your contribution to the financial health of our church has been over the past two years. Whether it was upgrading our facilities for needed safety upgrades to the HVAC system or the opportunity to update some other areas of our building, your generosity has been incredible and has allowed us to sustain our staff as well as continue to thrive.

And while much has been changing in our world around us, God remains unchanging. For us as a church, the pandemic changed the way we do life together, which has been another opportunity for us to ensure that we are stewarding our resources and finances appropriately. Part of those changes is that the past is no longer a good predictor of the future, so we are constantly revising and planning accordingly.

God has been faithful, and so have all of you in your generosity. That being said, we want to let you know that the current financial year that ends in June has us below our planned giving; however, we are also below our planned spending. Another way to say this is that God, through your generosity, has continued to provide for our needs—even though that's not what we planned earlier in our planning process.

As I look at this community and the way it has endured and not grown weary over the past two years, I am incredibly proud to see what God has done in and through us. This has not been an easy two years for churches. I know many churches have faced tough circumstances, and I know several pastors who have left the ministry. And while there have certainly been moments where I have wondered what God was doing and what the next step was, and if we were even going to make it, God has been incredibly faithful, and your commitment to our community is not to be understated. Thank you!

A Warning and Invitation

But lest we rest on our laurels, Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus doesn't end with only encouragements. It isn't without its warning and a harsh warning at that. I would be remiss not to finish the letter with an eye on the future direction of where we are also going as a community.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far 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. Revelations 2:4-6

For all of Jesus' excitement and encouragement of this church, he still had deep concerns. And the overarching concern is that

they had *"forsaken the love they had at first."* The Greek word for "forsaken" is the verb *aphiemi*, which means "to leave behind" or "to send away."

For all the good they had done, for all of the orthodoxy and orthopraxy and not growing weary, there was concern that they had or would leave behind the love they had at first. You see, the concern is that as this church was facing all sorts of challenges and inflection points as well as overcoming and being diligent in their orthodoxy and praxy, there was the assumption that their love would follow. But what if it wasn't there? Jesus' concern was that in all of their endurance and doing; they would grow cold to the love they once had.

I wonder if, through all of the change and the trauma of the past few years, so much of our communal life has been to simply keep putting one foot in front of the other to just keep moving forward, and we have done that well. But as we put our heads down and continue moving forward, have we lost our first love?

You see, I don't know if I see this as our exact moment, but I read a text like this as a warning. Can we avoid the mistakes of the Ephesian church? Can we retain our first love in the midst of all of the chaos of our modern lives? For the church in Ephesus, the concern was that at their inflection point, they were active, and in their activity, they lost their connection and their first love.

I remember a year or so into the pandemic when we as a team had been racing hard after so many different things and trying to sustain our activities of ministry. At the same time, I was at the height of the interviewing process with the elders, and I was drained. It was a combination of poor self-care mixed with the adrenaline rush of trying to sustain so much, that I had lost the intimacy with God.

I was spending my days trying not to grow weary, trying to do the things of ministry but was ultimately seeking these things in my own power, not through the power and intimacy of God. The assumption I had made was of course God was with me and things were going well, of course! But in all of my activity, I had grown distant from God, and my first love had faded.

There was no sense of his presence and no sense of his nearness. All attentiveness to God was gone. I wonder if I'm alone in this? I wonder if the warning that Jesus is giving to this church in Ephesus is also a warning for us.

In the same manner that this church in Ephesus was reaching an inflection point, I think we are in that space as well. So much has gone on in our community, and as we look to the future with faith and excitement, I want us to remember and heed the warning of Jesus to this church; let us not forget our "first love."

Let us not become so overwhelmed with the work of the kingdom that we forget the king. Let us stay true to the things we did at first. These are the foundational things we do in order to aim the desire of our hearts at its proper place, that in which we find God.

We cannot lose our first love because, as is the warning here in the text, God will remove our lampstand. Which is Revelation's way of saying, he will remove our identity as a church.

Jesus finishes the letter with:

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Rev. 2:7

The promise of God is that if we can retain our first love, if we are able to endure and find a path through our moments and remain faithful, God says we will receive life!

Poltorak's Story

I love their story, and I love the way in which this community has stepped up in their story. They make the really important point that we cannot do this Christian life alone, but that community is necessary for us to develop and grow as well as to follow Jesus.

Toward the end of Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus, as he is warning them of the potential they have to forsake their first love, he offers two things for them to do. First, "repent," and then the second, *"do the things you did at first"*—repent, stop, turn around, re-think, confess, all of that! Renounce the ways in which we have drifted into doing over being with God.

What was the thing you did at first? The thing you did at first when you fell in love with God was prioritized your attentiveness to God. This is true of all circumstances of love. If intimacy is to grow in any relationship, there must be a priority of attentiveness to the other.

Church, I am really excited about where we are going as a church community. I deeply believe in the church in the Bay Area, and with all of the complexities and challenges ahead of us, I believe this new era will be marked by a greater presence and intimacy with God. But we must continue to prioritize our attentiveness to him.

I also recognize that, at least in my lifetime, this seems to be one of, if not the most difficult times to faithfully follow Jesus. There are many narratives vying for our attention and allegiance, many distractions luring us away from the quiet life of Christlikeness, or cause apathy toward the way of Jesus. So to close, I just want to mention two things that I believe we must do if we are to retain our faithfulness to Jesus.

Community Life

First, as we saw in the video, we are not able to do this Jesus following alone. The concept of just us and our Bible following Jesus is completely foreign to the New Testament. And so, we deeply believe in what we are doing here as a Church. We deeply believe and care for the steps our community is taking in becoming a transformed people seeking to transform the peninsula, and we want to invite you to commit to living in community.

If you are new here or are checking out other churches, we invite you to double down here or somewhere. There are so many great churches and communities of faith throughout the peninsula. Our goal and our commitment are to the fact that you need a community of faith to do this Jesus thing. If that is CPC, we are so glad you are here. If that is somewhere else, we would love to help you find a community to belong to. It is impossible for me to know what your exact next step should be, but I can make some suggestions.

For some of you, the next step is for you to increase your commitment to the gathering. To go from attending once a month to twice, or from twice a month to three times a month. Whether that attendance is online or in-person, this is your next step.

For others of you, the next step may be that you've grown comfortable with being at home and you are ready and able to move back to in-person; we invite you back. But we recognize that this step is not for all, and we support and love those of you who are not ready to be back in person.

For still others of you, your next step is to move from attending to serving. We have many needs for people to get involved in ministry both inside and outside CPC. Check out CPC.org/serve for actionable steps forward.

Apprenticeship to Jesus

While we all do this in community, the next step for all of us is to recommit to our "apprenticeship to Jesus." One of my favorite writers talks about discipleship in the modern category of apprenticeship. In the same manner, as an apprentice to an electrician is learning the very essence and life of an electrician; this is what we do by apprenticing to Jesus—taking up the habits and way of living that Jesus invites us all into.

This will mean we re-organize, re-orient, and take the mundane aspects of our lives and bring them into conversation and dialogue with the way of Jesus. For some of you, this means you haven't been prioritizing the presence of God, and that is the next step for you. One small step to organizing the whole of your life around Jesus. One of my favorite quotes on discipleship is Eugene Peterson's line, "A long obedience in the same direction."

This is the call, a long obedience in every tiny decision in the direction of Jesus. Right now and for the past six months, we have been diligently working on some really exciting things for this fall around the topic of discipleship or apprenticeship to Jesus. And in the fall, we are launching a new phase of the vision at CPC

that is going to call you to more intentionality personally and as a church community in apprenticing under Jesus our Rabbi.

It is a fresh look at spiritual formation and how we go about discipleship or apprenticeship to Jesus as a church. It will require you to engage at a level that you may not be at now, but we are really excited about what God has in store for us. There is more to come in the months ahead; I can't wait!

Next week we are starting a long series in the Gospel of Mark. The purpose is for just this; we are going to sit with Jesus, our rabbi, to learn and listen to Jesus as he leads us into life and the life to come. We invite you to join us, and we can't wait for what will happen by spending such a long time looking at Jesus.

Church, I am more excited than I've ever been about the future of the church. I am excited about where we are headed, about the big work God is doing in the big "C" church. And as a staff, we are really excited for the next phase of life at CPC. We hope you are as well, and we hope you will join us!

If I could summarize all of this, it would be, "Well done." God has been faithful to us; we have been attentive to him. May we not rest on our laurels but recognize the way in which we must continue to find our first love and organize our life around Jesus. He is the one who has sustained us. He is the one who has walked with us. He will be the one who carries us moving forward as well.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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