

Reigniting the Flame: Relationships Revelation 2:1-7

I. Reigniting the Flame & Starting all Over Again

This time last year, we went through a sermon series that called you to make seven commitments to spiritual growth in 2009. Remember those? They included such goals as reading through the Bible in one to three years, pursuing a spiritual friendship, praying for one person everyday to come to Christ.

So how well did you do in fulfilling those seven commitments? Mine was a mixed bag...for example I did pursue a spiritual friendship, but I did not read through the entire Bible.

I bring all this up, not to foster guilt, but to remind us that there is a critical dynamic about successful goal setting. This dynamic is especially true in the area of personal goals, such as being healthier or being more faithful in pursuing spiritual growth. Very few achieve their personal goals first time around.

The secret, are you ready, the secret to achieving personal goals is to just keep trying, again, and again, and again... The real failure in personal goal achievement is not failing to achieve the goal, but in giving up the battle. Those who are successful in achieving their personal goals are those who just never give up. Persistence is the key to success.

My motto last year to capture my personal goals, spiritual and physical, was “looking fine in 2009!” I did not achieve the physical health component of my goals! But not to be discouraged, knowing this dynamic about goal setting and never giving up, my motto for this year is...“Starting all over again in 2010!”

And that is my challenge and call to each of you this year...whatever past or needed goals you have, no matter how many times you have tried and not yet succeeded, don't give up, just start all over again in 2010!

There may be a few overachievers out there who accomplished all seven commitments to spiritual growth this past year. But most of us can just dig up that same list, dust it off, and start all over again.

You might need to tweak some of them to make them more doable, like commit to reading through the whole Bible in three years instead of one. That requires only reading a chapter a day.

Today we begin a seven-week sermon series on “reigniting the flame.” This is a metaphor for reclaiming passion in our relationship with God, rebuilding healthy relationships with family and friends, and living life on fire for Christ. Anyone else want to claim such goals in 2010?

This call to reignite the flame of faith, hope, and love will come out of exploring the letters written to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Today we are going to explore the first letter to the church in Ephesus.

II. Structure of Seven Letters

Before we discover the practical application of this first letter to reignite the flame in our relationships, let's explore the overall structure and background of all seven of these letters.

Revelation begins with our Lord Christ instructing the Apostle John to write letters to seven churches. In chapter 1, verse 10-11 we read, *"On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.'"*

To feel the full impact of what John is about to reveal to us, he first describes his vision of the risen Lord who is giving him this revelation. This is no cute little baby Jesus in the manger. This is no Jesus meek and mild; this is Christ mean and wild. This is Christ as He presently reigns, and will soon return to judge His people. Listen to this description of Christ, and let this image dwell in your imagination as we go through these seven letters...

Revelation 1:12-16

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 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.

These seven letters, and therefore this sermon series, is a call to revival, repentance, and renewal. It comes to us from the Risen Lord who loves us just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us that way! This is a call to reject what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace!"

Grace is free but it is not cheap, it cost Christ His life, and a permanent change of form. God's love is accepting, but it is not indulgent. Christ loves us enough to wound us, to do whatever it takes to rip the sin out of our life.

Salvation is guaranteed, but eternal reward is not. Our sin robs us of joy, power, and blessing right now, and will keep us from experiencing the fullness of potential eternal rewards later.

This is a call to let 2010 be the year where you press into Christ like never before. This is a call to reprioritize your lifestyle around what is most important, your relationships with God and others.

We should respond to Christ's presence and to the warnings of these letters that same way that the Apostle John responded...

Revelation 1:17-18

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 18 I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

This is the image of Christ you have as you worship and pray... Christ is standing in the glory of heaven right now with the double-edged sword of truth and judgment in His mouth and the seven stars of the seven lampstand in His hand.

We don't need to guess what this imagery means, because We're told in the next verse...

Revelation 1:19-20

19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. 20 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, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Christ is right now holding His people, His Church in His hand and is always in the process of refining us with fire! The meaning of the "angels of the churches," is debated. It is generally understood to mean both angles that are appointed to oversee each church, but also the pastors of each church, as "angel" simply means "messenger." So this is Biblical proof that Dana and I are "angels!"

Of course, it is also both encouraging and frightening to realize that as pastors, Christ is both holding us in His hand, and holding us accountable for the spiritual well being of His people!

There were many other local churches at this time, but Christ chooses to address just these seven directly. However, this letter written by John, would have eventually been circulated to many other churches as well. So most scholars agree then these letters to the seven churches had immediate application to these churches. But it is also agreed that the state of these churches represent the different states that any local congregation can find itself in at different seasons of its existence.

So then, the message to these seven churches apply to the universal church of Christ throughout the world and throughout all church history. The third application of these letters is that they apply to individual Christ-followers as to their current state of intimacy and obedience to Christ.

The confronting question to us then here at GracePoint and to you personally is this. Which of the commendations and rebukes presented in these letters apply to us and to you? As you read this first letter, allow the Holy Spirit to apply to you personally its commendations and its call to repentance.

Let's explore the first letter to the Church in Ephesus...

III. Today's Scripture

Revelation 2:1-7 (ESV)

2 *"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

2 *"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.*

4 *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.*

If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 *To those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'*

IV. Exploring the Letter to Ephesus

Christ is portrayed as the one who "holds the seven angels" in His hand, and the one who "walks among the seven golden lampstands." Remember, the seven golden lampstands represent each local congregation.

GracePoint is one of God's many "golden lampstands." Is it not a humbling, encouraging, and godly-fear inspiring thing to ponder that Christ walks among us?" It is encouraging and empowering to know that Christ is always so near. But is should equally fear inspiring to realize that the Christ who is in our midst is the same Christ revealed in these letters who has both praise and rebuke for us.

Christ praises the church in Ephesus for its "*works, toil and patient endurance*", and because they did not "*bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false*, they were "*bearing up for Christ's name's sake, and had not grown weary.*"

This was a strong, healthy congregation. The Apostle Paul's letter to this same church is one of the books of our New Testament. Their leadership included at different times men and women like Paul, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, and John.

The city of Ephesus was as pagan as you could get. The great pagan temple to Artemis, and Diana, and later to the Roman Caesars was there. There was evidently some heretical group called the "Nicolaitans" was there seducing many into heresy, false worship, and perverse sexuality.

In the face of these challenges and temptations, the Christians in Ephesus stood firm on sound doctrine, labored faithfully in ministry, and tried hard to obey the moral code of Christianity. And Christ commended them for all this.

But Christ also had a warning to them, and an invitation to repent. Now pay close attention to their sin. Christ did not call them to repent of doing sinful things. They were evidently authentically obedient, moral people.

Christ called them to repent over their motivation for being so faithful in ministry and diligent in obedience. Christ confronted them because they were worshipping mostly out of ritual, ministering mostly out of duty, and obeying mostly out of legalism.

Christ rebuked them because they had lost their “First Love.” These were second or third generation Christians from when Paul wrote his letter. They had somehow slipped into serving Christ with a passionless Christianity.

It is interesting that Christ still praises them for their worship, ministry, and obedience, even if it was driven mostly by duty and legalism. Clearly even such ritualistic worship and dutiful ministry is better than reverting to a life of total paganism and rebellion. Even we would choose cold but obedient children over wicked and rebellious children. But it wouldn't be very delightful or intimate.

So it is with God. The Father, Son, and Spirit wanted so much more than dutiful obedience from the Ephesian Christians. God wanted their hearts, their love, their passion. God invited them to return to their First Love, the love that came so easily when they first were delivered from their darkness and sin, and made children of God, filled with the Holy Spirit.

He invited them to remember and reclaim the days when they first became believers, when their worship was spontaneous out of a grateful heart, when their obedience was still perhaps mixed with more sin, but it at least was driven by love of God, and when their ministry was perhaps less polished, but it was driven by an unquenchable enthusiasm and zeal for others to experience the same joy and freedom they had discovered in Christ!

So critical it was that these Ephesian believers reclaim their first love that Christ warned them if they did not, He would remove their lampstand. In other words, they would cease to be a true local manifestation of the universal Church of Christ.

We talk about the “marks of the true church” being the proclamation of the Word, the right administration of the Sacraments, and godly discipline.” But here Christ is revealing that the most important mark of the true Church is agape love.

Lastly, Christ reveals one of the seven promises made to those who overcome in Christ. In verse 7, *“To those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”* Real life and true paradise comes from overcoming the world in Christ, not pursuing the power and pleasures of this world.

V. “Ephesus” Churches & “Ephesus” Christians

Now let’s explore how all this applies to us. An “Ephesus” church, or an “Ephesus” Christian, is one who does worship the Trinity, but more out of ritual than spontaneous joy. An “Ephesus” church does engage in ministry, but more out of duty than delight. An “Ephesus” Christian does seek to reject blatant sin, but driven more by legalism than love.

I will leave it between you, your Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit to discern if in any degree you are living like an “Ephesus” Christian.

As for GracePoint being in any degree an “Ephesus” congregation, I would have to say this is hardly, if at all, true of us right now. I think that perhaps to some degree you might have slipped into some of this back in the years when you were overly consumed by fighting the PCUSA.

As to commendation, like the church in Ephesus, GracePoint too has always been a congregation who *“cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.”* You have always fought the good fight for sound doctrine and Biblical morality. Christ who holds your lampstand in His hand and walks among commends you for that!

But we all, individually and collectively, must always fight against the lost of First Love. Duty, legalism, and ritual are three enemies that continually seek to sneak in and steal away our First Love.

The evangelical world has a term that we don’t really use here, called “backsliding.” Usually we call someone “backslidden” when a Christian has fallen away from active fellowship and service. But Christ here is calling the Ephesian believers “backslidden” even though they were still faithful in worship, ministry, and service.

We are backslidden to whatever degree we have moved away from serving God out of First Love agape love. So the confronting question from God’s Word today is, are you in any way presently “backslidden” from serving God our “First Love” love?

VI. Reclaiming Our First Love of God

If so, then our passage also reveals the remedy for backsliding...“remember, repent, and return.” Verse 5 reveals the steps to reigniting the flame of our first love of God... *“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.”*

How many would like to see their love for God enflamed again in 2010? I know I would! I rarely offer steps to living out one’s faith, but here’s the closet the Bible reveals to steps in reigniting first love...

Three Steps to Reignite the Flame of First-Love Love:

1. **Remember:** “*Remember therefore from where you have fallen....*” Remember two things:

Past Seasons of Passion: Schedule some time away for a personal retreat, be in 15 minute chunks of time, or a full day or weekend away. Take this time to just sit and remember the times in your life when you felt close to God, and on fire for Christ. Such remembering stirs up hunger to revive such passion.

Activities that Foster Passion: Secondly, remember what kinds of activities stir up your passion for God, and make a list. There are the obvious ones of time in prayer, worship, and the Bible. But the Holy Spirit uses special “means of grace” in each of our lives. For me, there are certain movies, songs, and places that ignite passion for God.

2. **Repent:** The second step then is to repent. To “repent” simply means to turn from one way of thinking and acting to another way of thinking and acting. In this case, you spend time in worship, Word, and prayer asking God to bring conviction over anyway you have left First Love of God, and asking God to reignite First-Love flame in your heart.
3. **Return:** “*Do the things you did at first.*” Driven by the memory of past seasons of First Love, and a deep desire to reignite such passion, you would do whatever it takes to reprioritize and restructure your lifestyle and schedule to include the passion-for-God enflaming activities you identified in step one.

These are more like movements of the heart than steps to obey, and there are no guarantees of course. But I can make this guarantee because it’s a promise right from the lips and heart of the Father... In Jer 29:13 God declares, “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*” And in Mal 3:7, and in many other places, God declares, “*Return to me, and I will return to you,*” says the LORD Almighty.”

VII. Reclaiming First Love in our Relationships

Here is yet another powerful application of this passage. These three steps of reigniting the flame in your love for God, also work to reignite the flame in your love for family, friends, or your spouse. If you’re married, and you need to reignite the flame, go back and do the things you did when you were first dating. If you’re a parent, reclaim a bold vision for your children. If you have an estranged or strained relationship, choose that this will be the year of reclaiming First Love in that relationship.

God’s Call to GracePoint
In your relationships with God,
with loved ones,
in the family of God,
toward the wounded and wandering...
Reignite the Flame Again in 2010!