

Christ's Message to Ephesus

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of maintaining a heartfelt appreciation for God's love and grace, warning against the dangers of losing one's 'first love'.

Scripture: Revelation 2:1

Topics: "First Love", "Grace and Appreciation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delivers a profound message on Christ's warning to the church in Ephesus, emphasizing the critical importance of 'first love'--a deep appreciation for God's grace and love. He highlights that while the Ephesians were diligent in their works and patience, they had lost the wonder and amazement of their salvation, allowing familiarity to dull their hearts. Sparks urges the congregation to remember the grace that brought them to Christ and to rekindle their passion and worship, warning that without this first love, their ministry and relationship with God could falter. He draws parallels between the Ephesians' initial fervor and the danger of becoming complacent in faith, calling for a return to heartfelt worship and gratitude. Ultimately, the message serves as a reminder of the need for continual appreciation of God's grace in their lives.

Transcript

Now I think we can tackle this matter of Ephesus. We've been marching round Ephesus so far, now we try to get inside. I'll just read a part of the message, the second chapter, the book of the Revelation: "These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them which call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false; and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary. But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I will come to thee, and will move thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent."

So what we have to do, seek the Lord's help to do, is to get right to the heart of that message and find out what that thing was and is, upon which everything turned. For, as we have seen, the continuance of this vessel as serving the Lord's purpose did not rest upon a number of quite good and commendable things but it hung upon one thing and that is called the first love - "thy first love". And we are going to ask the question and seek in some degree to answer it: what is first love?

May I say here before I go on with that, that it is not my thought or expectation to make anything like an exhaustive study of these messages. Indeed I do not know whether I shall deal with all of them. But whatever we do, we shall seek to get right to the heart of the message and find out exactly what it is that is THAT expression of Christ which is so vital and so full of consequence as to make this whole matter of continued ministry into a crisis. For there's no doubt about it, that we're in the presence of crisis when we are here with these messages. There's a real upshot of a very ultimate and utter character bound up with these messages. We want to find out what it is that carries so much with it and means so much to the Church and to the Lord.

I have said, THAT expression of Christ; here I ought to spend time in again approaching this but I'll do no more, for I've had a hint that I'm putting too much in, or trying to. But it is perfectly clear to the simplest reader that it is that portrait of the Lord Jesus in chapter one that is spread over these seven messages. You probably have noticed that something out of that description of the Lord Jesus is used in the introduction to every message. There is only one slight change and that is to Philadelphia where instead of "who hath the keys of death and of Hades" the change is "who hath the keys of David". With that exception or change, every message contains something taken out of the description of the Lord Jesus "He that..." and then you have something from the full portrait and presentation of Christ, clearly implying that it is THAT which is of Christ which is governing in every case, all round, and everywhere, every time. It's something vital of Christ that's at issue. That is the important thing to note.

Now come to Ephesus. Of course Ephesus was the mother church of Asia. We know that to be so because it is said by Paul's three years there in Ephesus, "ALL Asia heard the word, both Jew and Greek" and it was the mother church. And in the introduction, the message to Ephesus, the Lord describes Himself as "he that holdeth the seven stars... and walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands..." Ephesus is inclusive of all. Ephesus is comprehensive. And so what is said to Ephesus is not just said to Ephesus alone, it's to Asia.

It is quite comprehensive this message. And as we are able to put our finger upon this vital matter right at the heart of things, I'm sure without my pointing it out, we shall see that it is a matter that is in no sense exclusively local or of a particular period. It is something that is ever the peril of the people of God.

So we return and say, what is this thing called 'thy first love'? For the answer of course, we have to or should, go back to the great letter of Paul which now bears the name "the letter to the Ephesians". We know it was the letter to more churches than Ephesus but that was one of the churches, perhaps the first one which had a name put on it in its circulation. We can, for our purpose, speak of it as the letter to the Ephesians. And if you call to mind the content of that letter, you will remember that it has a very great deal in it about love. Chapter 2, verse 4: "For his great love wherewith he loved us" chapter 5:2: "Walk in love as Christ also loved us" chapter 5:25: "As Christ loved the church and gave himself for it" chapter 3:17: "Rooted and grounded in love" chapter 3:19: "The breadth and the length and the height and the depth, the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ". It's not a long letter so far as compass of words is concerned, but what IMMENSE statements those are! What a tremendous love is represented there!

Yes, Ephesus was the church which had been given a ministry and revelation of love; the knowledge-surpassing love. And Ephesus had responded to it! Ephesus had responded to it, there's no doubt about it. Read chapters nineteen and twenty of the book of the Acts and see the response that they made to that love and to the man who had brought the knowledge of that love to them. As he bade them farewell, they knelt down together, he prayed and they wept much at his departure. It's all a scene of

divine love reciprocated.

Ephesus in a very real sense embodied love, from God and returning to God; from Christ to Christ. Yes, that's all very true. But you've got to add another word alongside of that to be able to arrive at the meaning of this 'their first love' and it's the other word which has the largest place in the letter to the Ephesians and it's the word 'grace'. Grace! I'll not take the time to give you all the nine references or mentions of grace in that letter, but grace, grace is everywhere. Grace is running through it all, it's all grace! WHY was there such a response to the love of God? Because they recognized and were fully alive to the fact of how GREAT GRACE there MUST be for SUCH people to be loved in such a way!

This first love is no sentimental thing. We talk about first love... a good deal of sentiment bound up with that phrase as often used. No, this is not something sentimental. This is a quality of love. The Lord help me to show you that quality of this love.

The Lord loved Israel of old. Oh, how the prophets declared that love, how the Lord made known His love for that people, there's no doubt about it; the Lord loved Israel. But Israel all too soon lost the sense of the infinite condescension of God to love them. The infinite condescension of God in CHOOSING them from amongst all peoples of the earth. And all too soon Israel allowed themselves to feel that THEY were something, and worthy of that love, and they became proud and they took the love for granted. THE sin of Israel was just that. In the end, well, it was just that, THAT; THEY were the people, THEY were the people! Yes! THEY merited this, THEY were worthy of this, THEY were something to take account of, they WERE the people. [?] All of them. That's how it came to be, that's how it came to be with Israel, and for THAT very reason, the covenant was broken and the Gentiles were brought in their place.

And do you notice about the Gentiles... when the apostle turned to the Gentiles, when the message went to the Gentiles, you always, you invariably have this most wonderful thing that you can think of - that WE should be allowed into this! Never was anything heard of like this; that Gentiles, the heathen, the people whom Israel called 'the dogs', brought right in, right into the family and given all the privilege of sons. Most marvellous thing! It was the TREMENDOUS APPRECIATION of divine love!

Did you hear our brother's prayer tonight, he might have known what I was going to say, first love, first love, first love. Well, in this case you see, it was like this, it was like this. Here is a wife. Here is a bride. The Church is the bride of Christ, not saying, "He's lucky to have ME for a wife, I'm quite worthy of Him, He ought to be very thankful to have such a wife as I am". But no, "It is the most amazing thing that He EVER looked at me at all! That EVER He should have given me a FIRST thought let alone a second thought. I can NEVER explain it, NEVER understand that! I'll never be able for all eternity to know why He thought of ME, let alone loved me and gave Himself for me". You see, that's the spirit of the Church, and that was the spirit of the Gentiles when the Jews just took everything for granted. It all became so common place with them... all that God had given to them and shown to them, well, there was nothing now very wonderful about that. It lost its lustre, its glory, its wonder, its amazement; so commonplace now... They could do as they liked with it, take it or leave it.

But not so the Gentiles, see them in the house of Cornelius, my word what openness of heart! See them in Philippi, what openness of heart, how they just drink it in there. See them in Thessalonica, as Paul said "you received the word not as the word of man but as the word of God". Received it! Whenever you move outside of Israel you've got an intense appreciation, a TREMENDOUS wonder and, coming back to Ephesus, come back to Ephesus - what have you got here in Ephesus? You have this: "not a few of them

that practiced curious arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all and they counted the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver". That's appreciation, that's appreciation, there's nothing commonplace there. That's first love, dear friends, that's first love.

The peril is, even in your labour and in your patience and in your conscientiousness and your sincerity and all these works and lose that - the glory and wonder and amazement of being saved at all has been lost. And all this marvellous revelation that God has given as to the Church's election, calling, vocation, destiny - what is called the eternal purpose - you can hear it without a thrill. You can have it all and it does not stir you to the profoundest gratitude and worship; it's all so commonplace... so familiar with it... It's lost its wonder. THAT'S the heart of the message, that's the heart of the message! I say that's the peril of the Church at all times. God has given so much, we begin to make it or allow it to be commonplace - "oh, we've heard that before, we know all about that, you can't tell us anything that we don't know in that matter, we've got it all, we've got it all" and we are not on our faces before God in the presence of it saying "AMAZING wonder, AMAZING wonder that ever I should have a place in that"!

"Consider from whence thou art fallen". The mighty price of their earthly things became as nothing, NOTHING, when they saw the Lord Jesus! They brought all those things of value to men and in this world by which they had laid such great store, yes a great price, as things of this world go. And they burnt them in the sight of all "That's rubbish! We've seen JESUS!" and not until you've seen Jesus does everything else become tawdry and worthless and no greater value than to go up in smoke.

To see Him... Oh, the revelation of Jesus Christ ought not to be a teaching, a truth, an interpretation, a book; it ought to be a WORSHIP. "And when I saw Him, I fell at his feet as one dead". Have you ever seen Jesus to bring you down like that? Have you ever seen what He has given to you to the point of making you say 'it's the most wonderful thing man could ever think of that I, I, should be given that, that I should have a place in that'? Do you see how we need to be recovered? Don't let us blame Ephesus, this is OUR constant enemy, it's my constant enemy. My continuous handling of these things through the years... always, always dealing with these matters and ministering them... my abiding enemy is familiarity and association with it all as with truth, as with truth; to lose the wonder. And it IS wonderful! And dear friends, that's your peril, when you continuously and repeatedly hear it, it would be as a song that has lost its enchantment, this tale that is true, a familiar story; yes, a wonderful story, but never bowing us before God in worship. That is our peril. That is first love.

And now you can see that you may have a lot of things and not that. A lot of good things. Oh, it isn't that you're all bad, or we're all bad, and there's nothing good to be said about us at all... there is a lot of devotion and there's a lot of labour, a lot. Yes, but, but what He is looking for is that TRUE heart appreciation of HIMSELF, what He has done, and what He has given. We move into this book and you find that you move into a realm of worship: "unto Him that loveth us, loosed us from our sins with his own blood, made us, made US, a kingdom and priests unto His God". WHAT can you say? Only: to HIM be the glory, to Him be the glory! You move into chapters four and five and that's where you are - a Church in heaven - a worshipping Church in the true and full appreciation of the Lord.

Now, that's not overloading you in matter, but it is putting upon us a very great responsibility. I believe, dear friends, that this is just the word the Lord would say to us all at this time. And I'm quite content to leave it there tonight. Having conference after conference, conference after conference... if you saw my office you would see a stack halfway up my own stature of reports of conferences over the years. You have to ask: with all that has been given, the volumes... the volumes that have been given through the

years; how much worship has it produced? How much of all that are we alive to, as to what the Lord has given? But please don't think that I'm making this personal, I'm only illustrating what I mean. What we, who are SO privileged, not here only, we the Church in our time, who have all this... so privileged to have the revelation of Jesus Christ. All the cost to those first servants of the Lord to give us this, all the cost to the Lord Himself that we should have it... Oh yes, what a price lies behind it all! How much do we value it? How much do we worship in the presence of it? How much does it REALLY mean to us? How much is teaching and truth and the Bible? How much does it REALLY touch our hearts? That's the question and that is the meaning of first love, first love. Oh, the appreciation that ever the Lord should have looked our way... to say nothing of just lavished upon us all that He's got to give! Well, there's the message.

See, we can understand now why it was the Lord could not be satisfied with a number of quite good things if that one thing - the essence of all the cost - was left behind. No wonder He says do the first works, go back again... first works; there they are. Oh yes, there's no doubt about it that they made a marvellous and costly, as this world would think, response to the Lord. I love to read that story in Acts 19 and 20 of Paul in Ephesus; tremendous riot where they would fain tear that apostle limb from limb. And some of these Ephesians said - ah, not only said but acted for his preservation - "Don't you go out there, you stay in here. We come between you and them"; and would not allow him to go out to them in their wild rage. They wanted this man kept because for them he was God's channel of so much. It's all such a wonderful picture of how they APPRECIATED what had come to them. Now the Lord says, "You've fallen from that, you've fallen from that, you've left that. You haven't given up Christian work, you haven't given up all Christian virtues, there's lots of good things about you but that's the thing that matters."

I need not add more words to this; you see, it's all the appreciation of the grace of God. The GRACE of God! Where should we be but for the grace of God? Oh, grace had no meaning for Israel; they didn't feel the need of it, they were self-sufficient... and they lost it all. The people who really put supreme value upon grace were the people who've got it all. Who've got it all! The Lord make us people like that, and stir our hearts and challenge us and recover in us THIS first love.

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