

# Taking First Steps

## A Church On Mission

Revelation 2:1-7

In this sermon series we have been taking our first steps together, we have talked about first steps as a nation, then as a community.

Today we look at the church. Specifically, a church on mission. Because frankly it is easy to get off mission. Let me illustrate: My undergrad degree is in Horticulture. An in one of the classes I took the professor said. "Trees grow up." I know I paid good money for that education. "They have a trunk, they have leaves and they produce a fruit, which is their way of reproducing. That is what trees do, that is their mission. Some trees produce what are called water sprouts or suckers. These are stems that tend to grow vertical and they usually are not able to produce the fruit of that tree. They have their own mission.

One day I went to a customers house and the person had cut down the tree in their front yard, thus ending the mission of that tree, But growing up from the base of the tree were dozens and dozens of water sprouts or suckers and this person had trimmed these water sprouts into what looked like a bush. He had changed the mission, it looked nice, but it would never really reproduce the original mission. Some churches can be like the owner of that tree. The original purpose of the church has been disregarded and people have resorted to beautifying the water sprouts.

In order to know rather we are contributing to the original mission or just trimming water sprouts in the church, we have to look deeper at everything we are doing

I have chosen a section out of Revelation because of any book in the bible Revelation gives us a straight on view of the deeper look that Christ takes when viewing His church. The best way I know how to describe it is this: It is like viewing something through **infrared lenses**. You know what I mean. When we are viewing something or someone through normal lenses, we see them like we see each other right now. But if we were to put on infrared glasses then we would see each other in a completely different way. We would see each other's heat signatures. Blue would be areas that would be colder, then as you saw warmer areas the colors would change from blue to green to yellow, then red and finally white would represent a person's warmest areas, like our internal organs or heart. We are looking at the same thing but we are viewing them through different lenses and so we get a whole different picture.

The book of Revelation is like that: We see the church through our lenses, ministries, relationships, worship services, outreach, etc. But Revelation introduces us to a wholly different way of viewing the church. It is in fact the way Christ views his church.

This book was written by the disciple John, who had been exiled to the island of Patmos, the reason was, in his words, *'because of the Word and the testimony of Jesus'* This book was written specifically for 7 churches, each of those churches would receive the entire document. So they all saw how God viewed each others churches. (How would you like that?) (The Baptist's- Oh yeah, give it to them Jesus; The Presbyterians- take that you Presb's; then he comes to the United Methodist's – and we go silent because now we are being viewed through Christ's infrared and perfect lenses)

The names of these seven churches are not United Methodist, or Nazarene or Independent, but many feel that the areas addressed in each of these letters to these churches are issues and qualities that churches today still must address and deal with in order to remain on mission. So let's dive into just one of these letters. It is the letter to the church at Ephesus. It starts out by saying:

*"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:" Rev. 2:1a*

Right from the start we are introduced to this infrared lens of Christ. Right from the start he is speaking to and through the angel that oversees the affairs of the church in Ephesus. Not the elders, not the appointed pastor, but the angel. This does not mean we as God's people don't have a significant part to play in the affairs of the church, but what it does mean is that there is a higher authority over our churches of which we have no control.

### The Maker of the Mission

*These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: Revelation 2:1b*

God is always introducing and identifying himself to us.

Moses was asked to take off his shoes then the very next thing that was said was "I am the God of your Fathers, the God of Abraham, of Issac and of Jacob."

In John 18, starting at verse 33, Pilate asks Jesus who is facing immediate crucifixion, straight out, "Are you the King of the Jews? After a few more words, Pilate asks again, in verse "So you are a King." Jesus answers, "You are right in saying that I am a King".

Jesus cannot deny God's nature or identity,

So the first steps we must take as a church and as individuals is to personally deal with who God is, before we can really participate in what He wants us to do. So John, with spiritual lens on, is showing us who Christ is. He is the one who holds the 7 stars which are the angels who oversee these 7 churches. And He is the one who walks among these 7 golden lamp-stands, which are the

7 churches. So with lens on a church is a golden lamp stand. Jesus said “I am the light of the world and the light that these golden lamp stands holds up to the world is Christ.

## What Counts Toward the Mission

*“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.” Revelation 2:2-3*

Then this letter sort of goes into a spiritual checklist of the things that this church is doing and not doing: First what they are doing>

- ✓ **Deeds** – OK that makes sense to us
- ✓ **Hard Work** – Yeah, I get that too!
- ✓ **Perseverance** – Not a problem, this too is an item that we all can relate to in whatever century
- ✓ **Not tolerating wicked men** – OK, let’s look at this one on the list, and basically there is not much complicated here either. This church would discern people who were just set against the things of God and would not tolerate it.
- ✓ **Testing Apostles** – Next on this list. This could mean a couple things. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century those who had actually been with Christ were known as a Apostles, so that could have been what this letter was referring to or in a broader sense, Apostle means one who said that God had sent them and in fact they had not really been sent at all, they were simply acting off of their own agenda. This letter was stated that this church was on guard against these kinds of things.
- ✓ **Persevering & enduring hardship** – Then the letter goes back to these 2 items but adds “in my name” which in the 1<sup>st</sup> century meant that they stood up for Christ as the reason for their existence and they had to preserve and endure hardship for taking that stand.

One last one on the list that you have to jump down to verse 6 to find

*But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate Revelation 2:6*

- ✓ **Hating the practices of the Nicolaitans** – What is this one? The Nicolaitians were a group of people who advocated that freedom in Christ gave them license to sin. They had worked out a compromise with the secular culture of the day, and they taught that spiritual freedom in Christ gave them the right to practice idolatry and immorality without consequences.

So there you have it. If you work hard, and guard against evil, you’re in good shape. Right?

That would be true, except for the fact that verses 4-5 are in this letter. Up to this point, this church at Ephesus could have been patting themselves on the back, and saying, you know what, “We got it going on!” But then comes verses 4-5 which I have titled:

### The Missional Deal-Breaker

*“Yet I hold this against you:” “You have forsaken your first love. 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.” Revelation 2:4-5*

When God says “I hold something against you” it is time to listen. A people who to be on mission, would do well to hear what God has to say next:

- Forsaking our first love – You mean I can have participated in all these other things, held the banner high on serving and working, been the watch dog to make sure we remained on moral high ground and worked at keeping evil from invading our church and missing the mark.

The word “Forsake” means to leave behind. It is like this, When we first accept God’s grace and love into our lives, we are so thankful and full of a spiritual fervor. But then as we grow, just like in the parable of the wheat and the tares growing up along side the wheat, as we grow there are great things that we are learning and incorporating into our lives. At the same time there is what I call a kind of Spiritual sophistication that grows up right beside the spiritual fervor and it can cause us to forget our desperate need for his love and our tremendous desire to simply share what we have with others. And if we go too long the tares just keep growing. (Have you ever noticed how that works weeds need no cultivation)

The formula is **Remember**:, Ask each other in Sunday school classes, and growth groups and at the dinner table and when you are getting ready for bed. “Why did we start going to church? Why did we start following Christ, in the first place?

Then **Repent** - start cultivating the spiritual life again. In some of those same settings, begin to say “we need to sharpen our spiritual hoes and our shovels. We need something fresh that causes us to drop the spiritual sophistication that has snuck up on us and caused us to forget our first love.

Here ‘s the catch if we don’t do this, he will take our lamp stand away. Meaning we will become a non-player in really carrying Christ’s light to a community and world that so absolutely needs it.

However, if we do, we become what Christ would call a:

### The Church On Mission

*“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.” Revelation 2:7*

I don't know exactly what fruit I will be eating or exactly where that paradise is, but it sounds a whole lot better than having my lamp stand removed from its place.

So with Spiritual lens on a church on Mission does all the things:

Works hard - Perseveres - Endures - Guards against evil, falsehood and perversion of the truth but does not stop there. If we stop there we miss the mark.

A church on mission is a group of people who never stray very far from their first love (Jesus Christ and his power to forgive our sinful lives) and they do that by remembering and repenting.