

## THE BUSY CHURCH

Major Osipovich was an air force pilot for the former USSR. He planned to give a talk at his children's school about peace. In order to do so, he would need time off from work to give his talk, so he volunteered for night duty. And that's how Major Osipovich found himself patrolling the skies over the eastern regions of the Soviet Union on September 1, 1983. That was the night Korean Air Lines Flight KE007 strayed into Soviet air space. Soon the Soviet pilot was caught in a series of blunders and misinformation. In the end, Major Osipovich followed orders and shot down the unidentified aircraft. The actions of an air force major preparing to talk about peace plunged 240 passengers to their deaths and sparked an international incident that pushed world powers to the point of war. He intended to do one thing, but ended up doing the opposite. Sometimes in life we find that, despite the best of intentions, we get ourselves into situations that get in the way of our relationship with Christ and find that we are not where we are suppose to be as Christians.

Today we are starting a series called 7 Churches, looking at the 7 churches of Revelation. If God were to write a letter to Bramalea Baptist Church today, what would He tell us? I believe the letters written long ago to these 7 ancient churches hold truth for us today.

Revelation 2:1-11 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: 2 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. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 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. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 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.

We see 4 things from this letter to the church in Ephesus;

### 1. Refocus – listen to Jesus

Relationships involve listening. We spoke last week about the fact that a big part of prayer is listening. It is not just doing all the talking but it is letting God speak to you first. The book of Revelation begins with the Apostle John, exiled to the island of Patmos, in prayer.

Revelation 1:10 On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet

Listening can be difficult in life because there are a lot of other things that we are hearing all the time. Listening involves focus. Sometimes we can have selective hearing, which means that we just tune out certain things. Listening means tuning it, adjusting the knob on the radio set until we can hear clearly. It is active.

It was a mild October afternoon in 1982 and Badger Stadium in Madison, Wisconsin was packed. Over 60,000 die-hard University of Wisconsin fans were watching their beloved football team take a beating by Michigan State. What seemed odd was that it seemed the more their team lost the more cheers and applause kept being heard in the stands. It was only natural that some people began to wonder who

these strange people were who were cheering while their own team was losing. As it turns out seventy miles away from Badger stadium the Milwaukee Brewers were beating the St. Louis Cardinals in game three of the World Series. Many of the Badger fans in the stands were listening to portable radios and responding to something else besides what was happening right in front of their eyes. In many ways that is a fairly accurate description of what the Christian life is like. Even in the midst of horrible circumstances in this world a different voice tells us we have something to cheer about.

There are different ways that God speaks to us. Sometimes it is through quiet solitude and reflection. As we pray and as we read the bible God speaks to us. We need to be sensitive to His voice. Sometimes God speaks to us through friends. Someone will say something and we realize that what they said is God's word for us at that moment. Sometimes it is through a message we hear at church or on the TV. God can speak to us through anyone.

Sometimes God speaks to us by dropping into our hearts a step of obedience. You are walking along and see a person and suddenly out of nowhere you feel like you should help that person. Maybe you feel led to pick up the phone and call someone or write an email. The more you act on those promptings the clearer you hear them.

Years ago when I was a pastor in St. Catharines I was speaking with our youth group about listening to God's voice. I asked them a simple question, had any of them ever heard God speak to them. The answer was no. We all hopped in the van and went to the mall. The instructions were clear, they would go in pairs. They were not allowed to speak. They would walk to the end of the mall and then back again. They would pray for every person they saw. They did that, and afterwards we got back into the van and went back to the church, still not speaking.

When we got back I asked them a simple question, "what did God say to you?" At first they all said 'nothing.' But then one girl said, "you know, there was this one man with a long brown coat, when I prayed for him I really felt sad. I hope he was OK." Then in amazement everyone else said they had thought the same thing. They really felt burdened to pray for that one man in the long brown coat. And then other things started coming up. They realized that God had been speaking to them, it was simply that they did not understand it was God that was speaking. How many times had they gone to that same mall and missed the opportunities to pray, simply because they were not tuned into what God was saying.

Step one, you have to listen to Jesus. It begins by tuning Him in, by placing yourself in a position where you are listening.

2. Remember – seek holiness, not busyness

The church in Ephesus was a good church. It had a strong foundation. It had been planted by the Apostle Paul. At the end of his second missionary journey Paul stopped there.

Acts 18:19 They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

After Paul left, a guy named Apollos came to Ephesus. He along with Paul's friends Priscilla and Aquila picked up where Paul had left off and continued teaching about Jesus. A while later during his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Ephesus for an extended stay.

Acts 19:1 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ... 8 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. 9 But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. 10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

During this stay the church in Ephesus was built up. After two years Paul left. At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul was sailing past Ephesus but stopped long enough nearby in Miletus to encourage the leaders there.

Acts 20:16-17 Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. 17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

The elders of the church were eager to go and see Paul because they saw him as the founder of the church. He gave the elders parting instructions to watch out for false prophets and those who would seek to lead the people astray:

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

We see in Revelations that this did in fact happened. The church had stood firm in the face of hardship and persecution. It had rejected the false prophets that Paul had warned would come. It had done everything it was supposed to do, and yet for all it's success, it had lost it's first love. They had lost that for which they were following Christ for in the first place.

Beware of anything that competes with loyalty to Jesus Christ. The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for him. -- Oswald Chambers

What do you do when you have replaced good for best? When you have replaced business for holiness? What can we do when we have shifted our focus from devotion to devotions? When love becomes duty? You take time to remember.

Think back to what it was like to first follow the Lord. For some of you this was long ago – for others quite recently. What was it like when you first understood that you had been set free? In any relationship it is always good to take time and review the good times. You pull out the photo album or put in the home or wedding video and remember again where your relationship has come from. A few years ago I was transferring our old home movies to DVD. It brought back a lot of great memories. God did this often with the Israelites. He was constantly reminding them of where they had come from in order to show His love.

That is really what the Lord's supper is all about. It was God's idea to regularly take time to remember what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. In every relationship it is important to take time and remember.

You can be serving in the church. You can be reading your bible and praying every day. Remember that busyness is not a substitute for intimacy with Christ. The church of Ephesus was a powerful church. Not only was it started by Paul, for thirty years the church had a significant impact on their community, and Ephesus was an important city. It was located along a major highway. It was a modern city. The great Theatre of Ephesus sat 25,000 people. Here is a picture I took of it when Naomi and I had the chance to visit the ruins of Ephesus back in 1994. It even had a Roman latrine. You notice my leg is in a cast, that is because I had broken my kneecap a few weeks before. Ephesus was a modern city that had a sewage system and even central heating. It was a great city and the capital of Asia, all roads along the coast led through Ephesus.

For all its significance and success, God looked down and warned them to be careful. Even a church that the Apostle Paul himself founded, a healthy growing successful church in one of the most important cities in the ancient world. It is not how the church was founded that is important. It is not the size of the congregation or missions budget or how many pastors are on staff. It is not the city it is located or the prime real estate the church sits on. There is only one thing that matters and that is our love for God.

Charles Swindoll once wrote, "Busyness rapes relationships. It substitutes shallow frenzy for deeper friendships. It feeds the ego but starves the inner man. It fills a calendar but fractures a family. It cultivates a program that plows under priorities. Many a church boast about its active program, something for every night of the week for everybody. What a shame. With good intentions the local assembly can create the very atmosphere it was designed to curb."

Those are words for us that we need to listen to if we're going to keep first things first. We need to reject the idea that business is the same as holiness.

### 3. Repent – restate your priorities

Once you understand the problem, the next step is to do something about it. That means you repent. To repent means to turn around. The word for repent in the Greek is the word METANOEO and come from two words, NOEIO which means to think and META which denotes a different direction. Basically it means to think differently. To change your mind and therefore your direction. You are going down a road and think you are going the right way when all of a sudden you realize that you are mistaken, so you do a U-turn and head the other way. It is an action word. It is not just being sorry over sin - it is setting your will to change your behavior.

Is there anything in your life that is getting in the way of loving Jesus. It can be something that you are doing (which you must stop) or it could be something which you have not been doing (which you must start). Personally I have found that my greatest area of weakness is not spending enough time with the Lord. The more time in His presence the more you know and love Him. The more you love Him, the greater your ministry will be.

Illustrator Gustave Dore works for DreamWorks studios as part of the team put together by Spielberg, Katzenberg and Geffen. He was handed a painting of Jesus just finished by one of his students. Asked for his critique, Dore studied it, his mind searching for the right words. At last he handed it back to the student. "If you knew him more," he said, "you would have painted him better."

C. S. Lewis said, “Every Christian would agree that a man’s spiritual health is exactly proportional to his love for God.” If you lose your first love for Jesus no amount of service you do will save your spiritual health.

By replacing activity for an intimate daily nurturing relationship with Jesus we run the risk of losing our first love. Think about it. Thirty years have gone by. That’s just enough time for this church to pass the baton from one generation to the next generation. And if they don’t pass the right baton with the right values and priorities, the church is sunk. That is what Jesus was saying to them.

Philippians 3:8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ

That was the greatest value in the life of Paul. The word “knowing” there literally means “intimate knowledge that can only be learned through time and experience.” Intimate knowledge.

When you begin a relationship with someone it starts with limited knowledge, limited experience. It can be a little awkward at first. You do not know what to talk about. Eventually you find common experiences. The more time you spend together, the more knowledge and experience you have. The same is true with Jesus. Perhaps the closest parallel to this picture of neglecting your first love is marriage itself. Most people do not immediately fall in love with each other. I knew from the first time that I met Naomi that I would marry her, but that is just me. It does not usually happen like that. Love requires time. It takes time for you to date and eventually fall in love with a person.

Likewise, you do not fall out of love with someone in an instant. It requires time. It is the a result of neglecting your spouse and misplacing priorities. Falling in love is the same as staying in love. You have to do the same things to stay in love as you do to fall in love. That is why dating your spouse is so important. You have to protect the relationship.

I saw a great post on Facebook last week, it said “my husband asked if I wanted to go on a date, and then we laughed and laughed. Then we went to Costco.”

The same is true with our relationship with the Lord. We have to protect and nurture our relationship with Jesus. That means building knowledge and experience. How do you do that?

#### 4. Repeat – return to your first love

It is one thing to understand your need for change and another thing to set your heart towards change but true change requires action. It means returning to normal behavior patterns. It is more than turning around, it is walking in the new direction. Jesus said to not only remember and repent, it is also important to repeat what brought you to Him in the first place.

I heard the story of a group of faithful Christian men and women in their 70s and 80s who were asked to share their secrets to staying in love with Jesus in the long haul to a group of seminary students. Each one of these men and women shared the very same thing. They never stopped doing the basics. There was not real secret or hidden knowledge. They just kept doing the basics and that kept them on track.

That is what Jesus is saying. Repeat the things you did at first. Go back to that place. That is how you keep your relationship with Him sharp by going back to the resources and going back to the word of God and going back to prayer and going back to spending time with other people in fellowship. Those things will keep you sharp with Christ.

It is interesting that Jesus said that there was one thing the church had in it's favour,

Rev 2:6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans which I also hate.

The Nicolaitans were certain people that mixed their relationship with Jesus and the pagan practices they had been brought up with. Ephesus was a center for the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis. To the Romans she was known as the goddess Diana. She was the daughter of Zeus and the twin sister of Apollo. She was a hunter and the protector of women. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. People from all over the roman empire would visit the temple, especially women who sought healing from diseases and help through childbirth. Increasingly, the temple in Ephesus saw Artemis as a fertility goddess and was a center for sexual immorality. The Nicolaitans sought to mix their devotion to Jesus with sexual immorality and the worship of Artemis.

When Timothy was leading the church in Ephesus Paul wrote to him;

1 Timothy 2:15 But women will be saved through childbearing -- if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

This may seem like a confusing statement, until to understand what was happening there in Ephesus. Paul is not saying that having kids saves you, he is saying that it is important that women remember that it is Jesus who saves us through faith, and not Artemis. He was addressing the Nicolaitans.

Jesus saves us. And that is also how this letter ends. Jesus says,

Rev 2:7 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.

Eternal paradise awaits those who love Jesus. It awaits you. That is what we have to look forward to. Eternity with Jesus in glory. That is why it so important that we keep first things first. Why loving Jesus must always remain our first priority.

Where are you at with your relationship with Jesus today? Is loving him your first priority?

There's a story of two fellows who opened a butcher shop and prospered. An evangelist came to town, and one of the butchers got saved. He tried to persuade his partner to accept salvation but to no avail. "Why Charlie, why haven't you become born again?" Charlie said, "Listen, Lester. If I get religion as well who's going to do the weighing of the meat?" What is more important, a relationship with Jesus or the money you make cheating customers through dishonest scales?

Refocus, remember, repent and repeat. Let me ask you a simple question this morning. For all your busyness and service, is Jesus still your first love? Does your relationship with Jesus come first? If it is not, then there are consequences.

Rev 2:5 ... If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Notice that God's words are conditional. If the church did not turn back then God would "Remove the lamp stands" of His spirit from the church. If God removed His Spirit from our church today, how long would it take us to notice?

History shows what happened to Ephesus. In its prime, Ephesus was a bustling, prosperous city. Its prosperity was a result of its location. It had a busy port where ships came and went bringing commodities from all over the Roman world. As sea levels fell, a river was dug to keep the city connected with the sea. Eventually that river dried up. When it dried up, the ships could no longer reach the city. Trade ended, and the city died. If God's Spirit dries up in you then you are finished.

In Port Elgin ON there is an Antique store as you drive into town. Nothing on the inside distinguishes this antique store from dozens like it in Port Elgin. There's a musty smell and dusty relics from the past. But if you look closely at the outside, you'll see something that makes it distinct: before it was an antique store, it was a church building. A focus on the future prevents a church from becoming a resting place for rusty relics.