

IS THE HONEYMOON OVER?

Introduction Part I: The title of my message this morning asks the question: “Is the Honeymoon Over?”

In a few days, Jerry and I will have been married 66 years. Our wedding ceremony took place in Jerry’s home church in Durham, NC after which we drove to Fontana Dam Recreational Area in the Smokey Mountains for our honeymoon.

We had reserved a little mountain cabin, nestled in the woods, next to a babbling brook. It was isolated. It was perfect!

But, the first night we were there I heard a shriek from the bathroom. I ran in and found Jerry staring at the toilet. She seemed to be terrified. I looked in and saw a little mouse contentedly swimming around in the water. It was clear that my new bride did not like mice.

While the incident was a bit disruptive, it did give me an opportunity to demonstrate my manliness to Jerry. I courageously flushed the mouse down the drain. A tentative peace settled down over the cabin.

Well, the next day we went to the grocery store to buy food for the week. We had purposely reserved a cabin with a little kitchen because, not having very much money, we couldn’t afford to eat out.

Soon we were back, each carrying a couple of bags of groceries. I unlocked the door to the cabin, took one step in, and then quickly retreated.

Jerry, not the calmest person in the world at that young time in her life, demanded to know immediately what was wrong. “What is it?”, she said. “Why aren’t you going inside? Come on, these groceries are heavy!”

I stammered around for a few seconds trying to decide how to break the news. Finally, I blurted out, “There’s a big, black snake curled up on the kitchen floor!” “What? You’ve got to be kidding! A snake?!” And with that, Jerry bolted down the path, away from the cabin.

I can’t remember what happened to the groceries she was carrying. But in a few seconds, she was back in the car, barricading herself from the danger at hand.

Sitting in the front seat, and speaking through a slightly opened window, she let me know, in no uncertain terms, that she was not, under any circumstance, ever going back into that cabin, that she claimed was teeming with wildlife. Reminding her that we would be soon heading for the jungles of Borneo as missionaries did not seem to help the situation.

Well, fortunately, the resort also featured a lodge, like a motel. The desk clerk, a mature, older gentleman, who apparently had some marital experience, seemed to understand my dilemma and agreed to cancel the cabin reservations and transfer us to different accommodations.

We ended up having a wonderful, memorable week, in the Smokey Mountains. I must tell you, however, that during those initial hours I wondered if the honeymoon might be over, before it really got started.

Introduction Part II: Today I want to talk about another, different kind of honeymoon. It involves one of the most wonderful churches mentioned in the New Testament – the church at Ephesus.

You may recall that a startling statement is made about this church which seems to indicate that the church's honeymoon with God may have, over time, lost its luster.

Let me begin by telling you something about the city of Ephesus. I think that quite a few of you have visited Ephesus and walked among its extensive ruins. But let me describe a few things for those of you who have not been there, and jog the memory of others of you who have.

In the first century, Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman world. Some experts have estimated its population to have been about 250,000.

(PICTURE OF AGORA)

An agora was the central space in ancient Greek city-states, which served as the hub of social, political, and commercial life.

(PICTURE OF HARBOR ROAD)

Ephesus was a major sea port at one time. An impressive road went from the city directly to the harbor.

(PICTURE OF LIBRARY OF CELSUS)

The Library of Celsus once held almost 12,000 scrolls. The building faced east so that the reading rooms could make the best use of the morning light.

(PICTURE OF THE GREAT THEATER)

The Great Theater had a seating capacity of 25,000 and is believed to have been the largest theater in the ancient world. It was used for dramatic performances and, during Roman times, for gladiatorial fights.

(PICTURE OF TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS)

Ephesus was known, the world over, for its worship of Artemis, goddess of fertility. The people believed that Artemis and her image fell down from heaven, at Ephesus, and that the city became the protector of the goddess.

The temple, built in her honor, was longer and wider than a football field, and is considered to have been one of the seven ancient wonders of the world.

The impressive structure, which no longer exists, was surrounded by 100 marble pillars, each 56 feet high.

Many priests and priestesses were employed to work in the temple performing religious ceremonies which included animal sacrifices. The priestesses are thought to have engaged in ritual prostitution.

The local people, and thousands of tourists, could buy small statues of the goddess. The people were told that they could worship in front of the tiny shrine at home, and it would be just the same as worshipping Artemis in the great temple.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EPHESIAN CHURCH

I've taken a few minutes to describe the city because I think it's important for us to understand the context in which the church was established there.

Put yourself in the shoes of the Apostle Paul and try to imagine what it must have been like to come into Ephesus for the first time.

- **We need to remember that this was a Gentile city where the Gospel of Jesus was unknown.**
- **Ephesus was the center of the Artemis cult where the goddess was worshipped fervently.**
- **Paul was preaching about the one sovereign God and the resurrected Christ, a message that was unlike any the people had ever heard before.**

Paul must have recognized what a challenge it was going to be to plant a church in Ephesus and he determined to return after his first initial stopover there.

He was actually concluding his second missionary journey at the time and was on his way back to Jerusalem.

MAP OF PAUL'S TRAVELS

- **So, after his business in Jerusalem was cared for, and after he had reported back to the church in Antioch, he once again headed west.**
- **Except for brief stops in several cities in Asia Minor where he had previously established churches, he came directly to Ephesus where he remained for almost three years.**

He began preaching in the Jewish synagogue that was in the city, explaining to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, God in the flesh.

- **Some believed, but the majority apparently did not, so he left the synagogue and moved his ministry to the lecture hall of Tyrannus where he continued to preach and teach for two years.**

The impact of Paul's ministry was extraordinary. Acts chapter 19 tells the story.

- **Apparently, those who embraced the message of Christ took the Gospel all over the province of Asia. People everywhere heard what was going on in Ephesus.**
- **God gave Paul the power to perform miracles. When handkerchiefs, that had merely touched Paul, were laid on the sick, the sick were healed!**
- **Evil spirits were denounced and expelled in dramatic fashion.**
- **A number of people who had been practicing sorcery brought out their incantation books and burned them in a public bonfire.**
- **Acts 19:20 says, "So the message about the Lord spread quickly and had a powerful effect".**

But the evil one does not surrender territory easily.

- **You will remember the story of Demetrius, the silversmith who had a large business in Ephesus making those small shrines of the goddess Artemis.**
- **He opposed Paul for economic reasons charging that so many in the city had become followers of Jesus, fewer and fewer people were buying the silver statues that he and the rest of the silversmiths were making.**
- **Luke, the author of Acts, reports what Demetrius said:**
 - **“Gentlemen, you know that our wealth comes from this business. But as you have seen and heard, this man Paul has persuaded many people that handmade gods aren’t really gods at all. And he’s done this not only here in Ephesus but throughout the entire province.**
 - **I’m concerned that the temple of the great Artemis will lose its influence and that Artemis – this magnificent goddess, worshipped ...all around the world – will be robbed of her great prestige”.**

- Pretty soon the whole city was in an uproar. Thousands of people poured into the great theater.
- Everyone began shouting and chanting, “Great is Artemis, goddess of the Ephesians. Great is Artemis, goddess of the Ephesians!” And they kept it up for two hours!
- The impact that the Gospel had made on the city was clearly significant, but can you imagine the pressure that the young Christian community was under?
 - It wasn’t easy being a Christian in Ephesus at that time.
- BUT -
 - In spite of the heathen culture in which the church was planted,
 - In spite of the opposition of the Jewish community that was there, and,
 - In spite of the communal worship of Artemis at the great temple built in her honor.

A wonderful church thrived in Ephesus. We can read about it in Revelation chapter 2.

Jesus Himself addressed the congregation and the Apostle John wrote down what Jesus said.

- **“I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don’t tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting. You hate the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do.**

What Jesus said to the church is really quite remarkable.

1. **“I know all the things you do. I’ve seen your hard work (v.2).”**
 - **Have you ever wondered if the Lord notices your service for Him?**
 - **Maybe you’ve spent hours working on a committee, or visiting the sick, or leading an Alpha group.**
 - **Maybe it hasn’t gone too well, and in a moment of discouragement, have you ever asked yourself, – does God even notice what I’m trying to do here???**
- **Well apparently, He does! He was certainly aware of the faithful, hard work of the Ephesian Church, and He told them so!**

- We're not talking about lazy Christians here. We're talking about hard working, diligent, faithful, believers who were fully engaged in the Gospel ministry, and Christ affirmed them.
2. Then the Lord goes on to say, "I've seen your patient endurance (v.2)." And in v.3, "You have patiently suffered for me without quitting."
- Again, we need to remember the context here.
 - Ephesus was still a heathen, idol worshipping city.
 - Christians undoubtedly had to endure criticism and ridicule.
 - We can see the grit of the early Ephesian Christians in this symbol that's carved into a paving stone on one of the main streets, (Show Picture), which is still visible today.
 - We've all seen the "fish symbol" which was, and still is, a symbol of Christianity.
 - Some historians believe that the symbol you see on the screen predated the fish symbol. This wheel, with its crossed lines, contains five Greek letters which stand for "Jesus, Christ, God, Son, Savior.

- Apparently, this symbol was used by the believers to secretly identify one another in Ephesus where persecution of Christians seemed to be on-going.
- No wonder the Lord commended them for their “patient endurance” and for suffering with Him without quitting.
 - They didn’t wilt under the burden that sometimes comes with serving God.
 - They were not afraid to live lives that were at odds with the local culture, no matter what the cost.
 - And remember that Jesus gave this commendation about 40 years after the founding of the church. These believers had carried on faithfully for 4 decades!
- 3. But there’s more: Jesus also commends the church for not tolerating sinful behavior among its members.
 - The pressures of the local culture in the first century threatened to impact the Christians just as our sinful culture threatens to impact us

- **Our tendency is to drift into a lifestyle that is displeasing to God.**
- **Many times, we don't even realize how much we have drifted toward the things of the world.**
- **But Jesus drew attention to the fact that the believers in Ephesus did NOT tolerate sinful behavior.**
 - **In verse 6 Jesus says: "You hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do."**
 - **The Nicolaitans were apparently professing Christians who compromised their faith in order to enjoy some of the sensual practices of Ephesian society.**
 - **The Nicolaitans were of the lot that said, "If grace abounds, let's sin as much as we can".**
 - **In his letter to the Romans Paul states flatly that this was ridiculous logic, and in so doing, he soundly condemned the activities of this aberrant group called the Nicolaitans.**
 - **It seems that the Ephesian believers resisted these worldly temptations and lived lives that honored God.**

4. Finally, Jesus commended the church for holding tightly to biblical truth.

- The false prophets and false teachers periodically came to Ephesus, just as Paul had warned that they would.
 - They stayed around long enough to attract some of the more gullible people. Then they passed their offering plates, and left town.
- On a subsequent, brief visit with the Ephesian elders, Paul warned them that even from within the church there would be some who would try and distort the truth. So, he charged the elders to be on their guard!”
 - And apparently, they were on guard because, as I said, it was 40 years later when Jesus commended them for holding tightly to the Scriptures.
 - He said: “You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles, but are not.” You’ve exposed their lies!

I think we’ve heard enough to convince us of the outstanding quality of the Ephesian church. Jesus Himself expressed His appreciation for the church. He said:

- You have worked very hard.
 - You have persevered under pressure.
 - You have not grown weary in well-doing.
 - You have carried a heavy load without retreating.
 - You have held firm to sound doctrine.
 - You have rejected the false teachers.
 - You have endured persecution for my name.
 - You have been faithful and you haven't given up.
- How would we feel if Jesus spoke these words directly to us, the congregation of The Village Church?
 - How would you feel if Jesus spoke these words directly to you, personally and individually?
 - I suspect that you would feel, as I think I would feel – very, very humbled, undeserving, and grateful.
 - The Church in Ephesus was outstanding, in so many ways. It can certainly be a model for our church, and for us personally. We would do well to emulate the Church at Ephesus.

THAT'S WHY WE'RE SO SHOCKED TO HEAR WHAT JESUS SAID NEXT.

- **After all the words of commendation, after all the comments of appreciation, after all the statements of approval . . . Jesus says:**

**I HAVE THIS COMPLAINT AGAINST YOU.”
(v.4)**

- **What? What is there to complain about, Jesus? This is a great church.**

- **But, we’re reminded that sometimes one negative factor can change a whole situation.**

ILLUSTRATION: Picture taking in Jakarta.

It was back in the ‘60s. I was serving as the field director of our missionary team in Indonesia. Our office was in the capital city of Jakarta.

One day a new missionary couple arrived.

The husband approached me in the office one afternoon and said, “Peter, I know you’re really busy, but could you possibly drive me around the city for a while so I can get some pictures before we leave town?”

Well, at that time, Jakarta was chaotic. It was a city of 5 million people. There were practically no traffic rules and no one obeyed the rules that did exist.

The city streets were jammed with thousands of motor bikes, scooters, bicycles, trucks, cars, donkey carts, pedicabs, - and there were only two traffic lights in the whole city. It was pure bedlam.

Well, I agreed, somewhat reluctantly, I admit, and we started out. For the next two hours we drove around, stopping where we weren't supposed to stop, being yelled at by the police, basically risking our lives.

It was blazing hot, of course, and the mission car had no air conditioning, but my new friend hardly noticed as he snapped away – no cell phone cameras back then.

We eventually dragged ourselves back to the office where a short time later my photographer friend approached me sheepishly and said, "Peter, I'm so sorry. But I just realized that I didn't have any film in my camera."

That one thing nullified everything we had tried to do.

There was ONE THING about the Ephesian church that seemed to have negatively impacted the church's relationship with Christ.

- They had forsaken their first love".**
- The Honeymoon was over!**

- They hadn't fallen into gross sin.
- They hadn't denied the truth of Christ.
- They hadn't embraced false teaching.
- They hadn't become weary in well doing.

But their love for Christ had waned.

- The devil couldn't get the Ephesian Christians to question the truth of the Gospel or deny the deity of Christ – but he successfully chiseled away at their personal relationship with Jesus.
- Their initial, passionate love for Christ was not lost, it was left. It was not abandoned, it was neglected.
- It didn't happen at one decisive moment, their love seeped away like water drips out of a leaky bucket. Maybe they didn't even realize what was happening.
- The reality is – Like a family home develops a noticeable chill when the furnace no longer functions, a relationship loses its passion and warmth when love cools. It's a clear signal that the honeymoon is over.

NOW IF JESUS WERE HERE TODAY, SPEAKING TO THE VILLAGE CHURCH, - WHAT DO YOU THINK HE WOULD HE SAY TO US?

- **I think if Jesus was speaking to The Village Church today, He would say some of the same positive things about TVC as He said about the church in Ephesus.**
- **TVC is a wonderful church. Not perfect, of course, but outstanding in so many ways.**
- **If people ask me what I think is the best thing about Shell Point, I usually reply, without hesitation, “The Village Church”.**
 - **And, I’ve heard many of you express similar thoughts.**
- **If Jesus were here speaking to us, I think He would express appreciation for:**
 - **Our church’s significant array of ministries.**
 - **The impressive percentage of our congregation personally engaged in those ministries.**
 - **Our church’s evangelistic outreach through the testimony of individuals, Alpha, and other means.**
 - **Of course, Jesus would applaud TVC’s extensive involvement in world missions.**
 - **He would commend the church for the spirit of mutual love and fellowship among the believers.**

- He would certainly affirm the biblical preaching and God-exalting music which characterizes TVC.
- And the list could go on . . .

BUT, and this is what Pastor Andy would call a “NEGATIVE BUT” . . .

- But, there is that one annoying statement of Jesus:
 “I have this complaint against you. You have forsaken your first love. You don’t love me like you did at first.”
- We’re forced to ask the question: In addition to Christ’s affirmation of The Village Church would He have the same complaint against our church as He had against the church in Ephesus?
- And, I am forced to ask the question: would His complaint not only be against our church body, but would it also be against me personally?
- And, might He be saying the same thing to you?
- It’s so easy to get caught up in activity, even busy religious activity, and neglect the love dimension.

The Pharisees were very diligent in their religious activities but it was all on the outside.

- They were motivated by a sense of duty.
- They performed their religious exercises to impress people
- Many of the things they did were probably good things, but their efforts were rejected by Christ;
- Why? Because God does not tolerate religious activity that is not prompted by love.

Maybe we can recall times in our marriage when the love relationship with our spouse seemed to wane?

- This can easily happen in the early years when the rhythm of married life begins to really kick in. You'll remember how . . .
 - We were busy with trying to provide for our families.
 - We were busy trying to be good parents.
 - We were occupied with trying to advance our careers.
 - We were striving to keep the household running well.
- We were busy doing good things, BUT, in the process our spouse became invisible to us.
- Did it ever happen to you???

- **Not that we didn't love our spouse any more, but, that first love, that honeymoon love, was somehow put on the shelf.**
- **Obviously, the same thing can happen in our relationship with Christ.**

JESUS PROVIDED A REMEDY FOR A CHURCH'S COOLING LOVE.

- **First, He said REMEMBER!**
 - **Remember how you felt when you first believed and recognized that you were a new creature in Christ. The load of sin was gone!**
 - **The writer to the Hebrews put it this way:**
 - **"Think on those early days when you first learned about Christ. Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering. . . You accepted it with joy. You knew there were better things waiting for you that will last forever." (Heb. 10:32-3**
- **Second, He said REPENT. Change your direction, and turn back to me.**

- Don't continue down the single-lane road of religious activity.
- Get on the two-lane road of service for Christ prompted by love for Christ.

BUT HOW DO WE DO THIS? How do we sustain and increase our love for the Lord.

- I'm sure that many of us have wrestled with this question at different times in our Christian lives.
- Most of us want to love Christ more, but how do we rekindle that honeymoon love?

Let me mention two things that I have found helpful.

1. First, we need to remember the enormity of our sin.
 - Maybe for individuals who have been saved out of a life of hopeless addiction or debauchery, the memory of that lifestyle is not easily forgotten.
 - But for those of us who were blessed with the nurture of Christian parents, and who came to faith at an early age, it's easy for us to forget our culpability before God.

- **A reminder to all of us: We were all born in sin. We were all headed for a very dark future. We were all hopelessly lost. We must never forget this.**
 - **Someone has said, “When we lose sight of the seriousness of sin, we begin to lose the thrill of our forgiveness.”**
 - **And when we lose the thrill of our forgiveness, we can easily lose our passionate love for Christ. We dare not forget what Christ has saved us FROM.**
 - **Jesus said that the person who was forgiven much, loves much. (Luke 7:47)**
- 2. Second, we need to remember the boundless love that our great sovereign God has for hopeless sinners like you and me.**
- **God’s love for us is unchangeable. It’s undeserved, it’s unlimited.**
 - **It’s not based on who we are. As Pastor Andy has reminded us numerous times, the Israelites had very little going for them:**
 - **They were a tiny nation.**
 - **They were not powerful or prestigious. They did not have great wealth.**

- **God just loved them, because He loved them. And God loves us in the same way.**
- **We can't explain His love but the proof that He loves us is so clearly evident it would be pure folly to deny it.**
- **So, when we remember who we are, just hopeless sinners, and when we understand who He is, and how He loves us, our love for Him grows into a river of gratitude and praise.**

Maybe we're thinking at this point, "Is this really such a big deal? Why take a whole sermon to speak about one basic truth. Don't we all know that we ought to love the Lord?" Of course we do!

But, let me remind you in closing that Christ took this love issue very seriously, much more seriously, I fear, than we do most of the time.

- **When asked by a religious leader what the most important commandment was, Jesus quoted the command from Deuteronomy:**
 - **"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength."**

- What's described here is no "puppy love". The love Jesus is talking about is an all-out, no-holds-barred kind of love.
- We remember well Jesus' encounter with Peter after His resurrection. Three times he asked Peter, "Do you love me, Peter?"
 - It's pretty clear from this conversation that Jesus wanted to be certain of Peter's undivided love for Him.
- Then there's Jesus' reprimand of the church in Laodicea. The believers there were all caught up in things and apparently had let their love for Christ cool, like the Ephesian Christians had.
 - Jesus could not have been more clear in his rebuke of the Laodicean Christians who it seems no longer loved him passionately.
 - He said, "Since you are neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." That was pretty graphic!
- Then we have Jesus's words to the Ephesian Church - this very, very fine church:
 - "If you do not repent", He said, if you do not change, "I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

- **Jesus warned this gallant church –**
 - **Which stood faithful in persecution.**
 - **Which helped spread the Gospel all over Asia Minor.**
 - **Which held firmly to sound doctrine.**
- **He stated flatly that their situation, their station, their experience as a life-giving church - would change drastically if they did not love Him unconditionally as they once did.**
 - **Jesus said that the light of the Gospel which, at one time, shown so brightly from this church, would be snuffed out! He would remove their lampstand.**
 - **The implication is that the great Ephesian church, would become a mere shadow of what it once was, because their love for Christ had grown cold!**

Loving Christ is such a critical component of our faith because when we are motivated by love for Him it impacts everything about us.

- If I genuinely love Christ, I'll avoid doing anything that might grieve Him.
- If I genuinely love Christ, I'll strive to do everything I can to please Him.
- Loving Christ deeply, will permeate every aspect of our lives because when we love Him, we'll have a compelling desire to honor Him, exalt Him, and glorify Him in everything we are, and in everything we do.

Remembering always that: WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.