

Undefeated

4. *Undefeated Love*

April 25, 2021

Recently I saw a list of the top traits singles are looking for in a future spouse. It included qualities like kindness and honesty, physical attractiveness, engaging personality, income potential, and funny.

The book of Revelation gives us a list of what Jesus is looking for in his people the church - which is called the bride of Christ. You might think that the list would include traits like moral, mission-focused, faithful, doctrinally correct.

Those are all admirable qualities in believers – but it is missing the most important. Revelation 2 tells us that believers in the city of Ephesus had all of these qualities, yet they were missing the one trait that is most essential. The lack of this trait was so serious that it threatened their future as a church.

The book of Revelation begins with the Apostle John describing a vision of the risen Jesus in glory. Jesus told John to write down messages to each one of his 7 churches in Asia. The first church Jesus speaks to was Ephesus.

Ephesus was an important and prosperous town, and you can still see the ruins of the city today. Here's the message Jesus gives to the people of the church in Ephesus:

“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.

The lampstands represent the churches, so Jesus reveals that he is present and moving among his churches. Then Jesus starts off noticing some positive aspects of the Ephesian church – and he sees a lot he likes. In Rev. 2:2-3 he says: *I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.*

The Ephesians are actively ministering to others: sharing the Gospel, feeding the poor, discipling each other. And they don't quit-- they keep at it.

I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. They know what they believe and why. They don't follow visiting teachers who are teaching untrue stories. They knew their doctrine.

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. The city of Ephesus was hostile to Christ-followers, but even when the believers lost their jobs or freedom because they were Christ-followers, they didn't back down or get frightened. So, the Ephesians had a strong spiritual resume! They were diligent Kingdom workers, faithful, doctrinally sound, morally discerning.

If Jesus described me that way, I'd feel good! I'd stand up a little straighter. If I was the pastor of a church that Jesus described that way, I'd feel like I was doing a good job. But all was not well in Ephesus. There was a problem. Jesus has an issue with the church.

Revelation 2:4 Jesus says: *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.* The Ephesian believers were doing a lot of good things, but they had neglected a crucial priority: that is, love. ***They had forsaken the love they had at first.***

Now, I used to take that to mean that they drifted from prizing Jesus as their first love. But the verse doesn't say that! It says, "The love you had at first." Love for who?

It could refer to their love for Jesus, but I don't think that is what Jesus meant. I believe Jesus is saying that ***they didn't love one another*** like they did at first. Here's why I think that: The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesians – it is the book of the Bible we studied before Easter. In it, Paul took pains to urge the Ephesians to love one another. He writes about relational issues: the need for racial reconciliation between Gentiles and Jews; healthy relationships between family members. And listen to what he prays for the Ephesians:

Ephesians 3:17-19 And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

It sounds like Pastor Paul was trying to spur them to elevate their love for one another. And evidently, from what Jesus says in the book of Revelation, they hadn't followed through. They worked hard and taught correct doctrine, but they had allowed love for one another to take a back seat.

Jesus said that their failure to love one another would cancel out all the good stuff they were doing otherwise. And that is what 1 Corinthians 13 tells us, too. It says that without love none of our efforts matter!

For example, 1 Corinthians 13:2-3 says, *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ... If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

1 Corinthians 13:13 says, *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* Love is even greater than faith and hope because it encompasses them both: 1 Corinthians 13:7 *"[Love] always trusts.* Faith always involves trusting. *[Love] always hopes."* To love someone, we must have faith [trust], and hope for the future with them.

In this series “Undefeated,” we looked at how our faith can prevail under pressure and how we can sustain our hope. Today we’re finishing the series by looking at how our love for others can go the long haul.

So how can we tell whether our love is slipping like the Ephesians? Here are a few indicators our love is slipping:

We serve without Jesus’ character

We may be working hard doing good things, but without the love, joy, and peace that are the fruit of being led by Jesus’ Spirit. The Ephesians were doing good things, but their love for one another had slipped to second place and it always grows cold there. That happens when getting the ministry task done becomes more important to us than the people around us.

We feel more strongly about moral standards than serving people.

Today the church in America is more often known by what it is against than it is for love for God and others. What if, instead, churches were known as people who always showed real love to whoever they met? How much more impact would we make? God’s moral standards don’t change, but we remember that the number one commandment is to love God and love others.

We are more passionate about doctrine than reflecting Jesus

That happens when we are more interested in being right than being connected with people. Revelation 2 shows us that doctrine and lifestyle matter, but without love they don’t amount to anything. People don’t care what we believe until they believe we care.

Let’s take a poll today:

How many of you were influenced to follow Christ by a friend or family member?

Look around – that’s a high percentage.

How many of you were brought to Christ by someone who didn’t like you?

How many of you came to Christ because you lost an argument?

Jesus commended the Ephesians for holding to the truth. But that didn’t help them keep their first love.

More committed to a cause than to people

Then the ends justify the means, and all kinds of atrocities can happen. Crusades and violence – believe that the cause is more important than anything. Jesus says it is not. So, what do we do if we sense our love for others is growing dim? Jesus tells the Ephesians in verse 5:

Consider how far 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.

Jesus was saying that in spite of all their admirable qualities, their church would cease to exist if they didn't change. Wow must have been sobering for Ephesians to read that! I'm glad he's not evaluating me. Well, he actually is. And Jesus is looking at each of us the same way – that's why this passage is in the Bible.

And the unbelieving world is evaluating us. Not as accurately as Jesus, of course, but we aren't wise if we ignore how we are perceived. So, what do we do when we find our love for others in the church and community is running low?

To rekindle our first love: (Revelation 2:5). Remember what love looks like.

Consider how far you have fallen!

Remember what how we loved others in the past. Sometimes when I counseled couples who have drifted and cooled in their love for each other, I'd ask, "Tell me about what first attracted you to your spouse. Tell me about what it was like when you were first dating."

Often just taking themselves back to that place in their minds will help reignite the love that lies dormant in their hearts. What was it like when you loved others better? Has there been a time I loved better than I do today? If so, then...

Repent

Jesus tells the Ephesians to repent. This doesn't just mean feel bad. "Repent" means to change our minds and turn around -- stop going one way and go another. There needs to be change in our attitudes and actions. Practically, relate to people differently.

Repeat healthy habits

Jesus says, "do the deeds you did at first." What did you do when you loved others most? Do that again! Let me share a couple ways to do that, then choose one of these to act on.

Listen first

Listening to someone else is an act of love. It helps us understand people rather than judge them and write them off. If we don't listen well, we won't love well. Sara Pascucci lives in Long Island New York. On February 3 she received a letter [<https://people.com/human-interest/family-shamed-leaving-up-christmas-lights-put-up-by-late-father/>] shaming her for still having Christmas decorations up. The letter was anonymous of course, and it read: "Take your Christmas lights down! It's Valentine's Day!!!!!"

The letter hit Sara especially hard because her heart was already heavy. Her father Anthony and her aunt had recently died of COVID-19 less than one week apart. Her

father had lived with her until he died. He had put up those Christmas decorations just after Thanksgiving— just as he did every year. After Anthony died on January 15, Sara couldn't bring herself to take the decorations down.

She decided to share the letter on a Mom's Facebook group and explained why it was painful. She hoped that the anonymous letter-writer might see her post. She wrote, "The family has been preoccupied with funeral arrangements, mortgage/utility payments, and just the grieving process of it all. So yes, we haven't gotten around to taking down his Christmas decorations. Be kind to people because you never know what they are going through."

Within minutes of her sharing the post, dozens of messages flooded Pascucci's Facebook inbox. Neighbors sent Sara's family heartfelt cards, flowers, meals, and a GoFundMe page was created to help cover mortgage payments and funeral costs.

What struck Sara most was that many neighbors started to put their own holiday decorations back up so she wouldn't feel so alone. They had climbed up to their attics and down to their basements to retrieve the decorations they had already stored away. In early February, they redecorated their homes for Christmas – just to support Sara. They did that because they knew what Sara was going through. And how did they know that? They listened to her instead of firing off a letter.

Who around you do you need to listen to? We all need to know others and be known -- that starts with listening. Some of the people sitting around you right now who are going through difficult times – they look good on the outside, but inside they are hurting and confused. When you listen, you can empathize with them. Others around you are doing well – they are enjoying God's blessings. When you listen you can celebrate with them? One of the reasons we grow to love those in our LifeGroup is that we listen to their stories.

Serve others

When we love people, we serve them. To re-fire our love toward others, find a need and fill it. When the plague hit ancient Rome, the Christians developed a reputation for loving and serving the people of the city, even those who opposed their faith in Christ. At the time Bishop Dionysius said, "Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead..."¹

We've got a plague going right now, and we have the chance to serve people. How much more Jesus-honoring to be known for loving people rather than battling over masks or something else. Perhaps your LifeGroup could take a few minutes and identify

¹ *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark

some needs that you see in the people around you. How could your group serve those needs?

Speak about our affection for others

When we love others, it helps to tell them that.

Jesus concludes saying:

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

History shows that the Ephesus did this! They repented and endured. Those believers received the Tree of LIFE - not the tree of knowledge. When we hear the Spirit talking to us, he will always point us back to Jesus.

Let's bow for a moment of silence and let the Spirit speak to us today.