

Ephesus: Loveless Orthodoxy

Revelation 2:1-7

Take your Bibles this morning and turn to the book of Revelation. We find ourselves in Revelation chapter two. This is a remarkable passage, the first seven verses that we will be examining here this morning. It is foreign to many Christians, unfortunately. But, frankly, it is one that stirs our hearts to self-examination.

Self examination is not something that we tend to do very well and when we do do it—at least if you are like me—we tend to be hopelessly biased in our own favor. But as we look at what the Word tells us we get a very different standard. And I pray this morning that we will examine ourselves and likewise examine our church.

I have entitled my discourse to you this morning, “Ephesus: Loveless Orthodoxy.”

Before I read the text may I just say that every person who knows Christ has issues, has problems in their life. And likewise every church has its good points and its bad points. And certainly that can be said of us.

But let me also say that when I talk about a church I am referring to a local body of believers that worships the Lord Jesus Christ in spirit and in truth. I am talking about the most precious assembly on earth that Christ has purchased with his own blood. I am talking about what the New Testament describes as a church, a place where biblical truth is proclaimed and it is protected without wavering, come what may. I am talking about a place where slaves of Christ are equipped by men of the Word who meet the New Testament qualifications for shepherds. I am talking about a place where holiness is expected, where sin is disciplined, where spiritual gifts are discovered as well as developed. I am talking about a place where strong spiritual leadership is bred and matured. I am talking about a place where world evangelism originates and where the offense of the cross is never compromised and the true gospel is preached. I am talking about, dear friends, the only institution that our Lord promised to build and to bless. This is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, in contrast to many counterfeit organizations that call themselves a church.

But, again, even in legitimate New Testament churches, there are problems. Our church has problems because it is a church filled with people that still sin, right? Absolutely. And we need to examine ourselves. We need to constantly be suspect of our own spirituality. Even this morning I hope that your attitude is one of saying, “Holy Spirit, help me to examine my life against your standard.” And so today we want to aggressively examine the Scripture and allow it to be the divine standard to expose our own iniquities. And certainly this is the purpose of the text that we have before us.

Let me read it to you beginning in verse one of Revelation chapter two.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and

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you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.¹

Now, you may recall in our study thus far the Lord Jesus Christ has appeared to His beloved apostle John on the volcanic isle of Patmos and He has addressed him there and commands him to deliver seven letters to seven prominent churches on the mainland. And each church is representative not only of the churches of the first century, but every church throughout the church age. Each church will receive a message of praise as well as of rebuke, of exhortation and promise.

And some believe that each of the seven churches outline seven periods of Church history from the first century until the coming of Christ. Honestly, I am not fully convinced of that position because frankly some of the parallels that people seem to attribute to these various stages of Church history and the respective letters of the churches seem to me to be arbitrary and a bit contrived. Much of the evidence is simply inconclusive. A lot of the things just don't fit. So where Scripture is silent I believe we must be as well.

However, there are numerous passages in Scripture that do explicitly instruct us about the steady apostasy that will characterize the Church of Christ as it progresses towards the Second Coming of Christ. We see that, for example, in 1 Timothy four and 2 Peter chapters two and three and so forth.

Now, I will agree that the character of the apostate church that will be found in the latter days, right before the Lord appears, is very well symbolized in the Church of Laodicea. And you will see that when we come to that, that seventh and final church. But the primary and stated purpose of these letters to these seven churches is to address issues pertaining not only to them specifically, but all churches that have existed perennially from that day until the Lord returns. And, again, we will see ourselves in each of these letters.

As an interesting note, though many churches existed in that day, it is fascinating that God chose to address only seven. And you will recall that the number seven is the number of completion in the Word of God, suggesting that these seven churches perfectly represent the same kinds of conditions that would be characteristic of every church throughout history.

And, frankly, I am convinced that the pervasive ignorance and many of the heresies that plague churches of our day are due to their failure to heed the solemn admonitions

¹ Revelation 2:1-7.

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pertaining to morality and theology that are found in these seven letters. In fact, over the years I have talked with various pastors and asked them if they ever studied these letters and ever preached on them and it is fascinating that for the most part people, ministers, other ministers will say, “No.” And they usually are quick to add, “I avoid preaching on the prophetic literature because it is so complicated and it is so controversial.”

Unfortunately, as a result of that, I believe that they, along with their congregations forfeit the promised blessing that we read about in chapter one verse three, “For all who will read and hear and heed the words of the prophecy.”²

So, again, I challenge you from the outset to examine your heart. I believe that the lash of rebuke and the sting of conviction will be felt on all of our backs this morning. And yet what is good to know is that with genuine repentance we can all find forgiveness and move ahead with a godly zeal and experience a whole new level of blessing that the Lord would have for us.

Now, let me give you a little history lesson about Ephesus. It was a magnificent city in the first century. It had about 250,000, maybe as many as a half a million people that lived in it. It was located at the mouth of the Cayster River and about three miles from the coast. There were many highways that connected Ephesus to the major cities of Asia Minor which, by the way, is modern day Turkey.

Commercially it was the largest city in the Roman province of Asia and it was considered by the Romans to be what was called a free city, a status that was given to certain cities that really demonstrated their fidelity to the Roman Empire and thus they were awarded the privilege of being able to govern themselves at least within the basic parameters of Roman law.

It was a place where sports fans came from all over the province to watch their annual athletic games that rivaled the Olympics of that day. And they had other sporting events throughout the year. In fact, they had a theater there that held an estimated 25,000 people.

Its religious life centered around the mystical cult worship of the Greek goddess Artemis. And that goddess was identified with the Roman goddess Diana. In fact, the temple of Artemis was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was 425 feet long and 220 feet wide consisting of 120 columns. Each of these magnificent columns had been donated to that temple from other kings.

The grotesque image of Artemis was prominent in the temple. If you have ever seen pictures of that goddess, she is a short, black, multi breasted figure that supposedly had fallen from heaven. Not surprisingly the temple was a place of gross immorality, considered sacred acts of worship. It was a place where temple prostitutes were considered to be priestesses. It was also filled with male priests and eunuchs and slaves. And it was notorious for their musicians and dancers that would use their music to lead participants in a frenzied kind of hysterical form of worship. It was a place where all the

² See Revelation 1:3.

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music would build to a fever pitch and then they would have their orgies and so forth, and considered all of this to be honoring to their god.

The temple was also designated as a safe protective asylum for criminals. So if you had committed some kind of a crime you could find sanctuary in this place of worship. It sounds just like the type of worship center that Satan would devise, does it not? Precisely. One resident of Ephesus, the Greek philosophy Heraclitus said, and I quote, "The morals of the temple were worse than the morals of beasts for even promiscuous dogs do not mutilate each other," end quote.

There was also a substantial Jewish population there in Ephesus. They were allowed to build a rather large and elaborate synagogue. Judaism was legally protected by the Roman Empire, but Christianity, you will recall, by the time of Domitian was fully outlawed. Emperor worship was mandatory for all of the people except for the Jews. And by the end of Domitian's reign in the early 90s, the persecution against the Church of Jesus Christ had become virulent and wide spread. And this is the time that we see the book of Revelation being written.

So, dear friends, this is Ephesus, a place where the apostle Paul originally brought the gospel at the close of his second missionary journey in about AD 52. You will recall from our study of Acts that that is where he left Priscilla and Aquila to continue on with the ministry. That is where Priscilla and Aquila met the great man of the Word, Apollos and ministered *to* him and *with* him. And on Paul's third missionary journey, it is the place where he spent three years establishing the Church with tears, going from house to house ministering the Word of God until finally, you will recall that the idol worshippers were losing so many worshippers, and the ones that were making the idols were losing so much profit, that the inhabitants of Ephesus ran him out of town.

Later while a prisoner in Rome Paul wrote the Church at Ephesus a letter. Eventually he left Timothy in charge of the church and around AD 66 the apostle John arrives at Ephesus and takes up the mantle of ministry until his exile to Patmos. Tradition has it that John was only exiled a short time, a relatively short time there at Patmos, we don't know for sure how long. Then he was allowed to go back to the mainland and continue to minister where he died soon thereafter.

So this was a significant and very prominent church in the ancient world. That this is true is reflected in the fact that the church here at Ephesus was the recipient of possibly eight books of the New Testament, the gospel of John, the book of Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1, 2 and 3 John and now even the book of Revelation. Moreover, Paul was serving the Church at Ephesus when he wrote 1 Corinthians. So that gives you a bit of a background.

Now, Ephesus today is in absolute ruins. Eventually the silt of the Cayster River destroyed that harbor and worse yet, despite the profound spiritual opportunities of the Church at Ephesus, despite the valiant beginnings, it eventually disappeared. And the reason for its ultimate demise is stated here in this letter, a reason given to us from the

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Lord Jesus Christ Himself through John, a letter written, now, about 30 years after Paul's ministry to them had ended.

So after John sees this astounding spectacle of the glorified, ascended Lord of the Church, he now obeys the command that is given to him in chapter one and verse 19 where the Lord says, "Write therefore the things which you have seen."³ Again, that is a reference to the past vision of the glorified Christ that he recorded in verse 10 through 16. And also write, "the things which are,"⁴ which is a reference to the letters to the seven churches in chapters two and three detailing the specific conditions of all of those churches and all churches that will exist until the events of chapter four and verse one begin to unfold. And He says write, "the things which shall take place after these things."⁵ That is a reference to the prophetic events detailed in chapters four through 22.

Now I have divided this little letter to Ephesus into five simple parts. We are going to look at the *praise, the problem, the prescription, the punishment and the promise*. Frankly, this is a similar sequence for all of the other churches except two, the Church at Smyrna and Philadelphia, as we will see.

So in verse one He says, "To the angel,"⁶ that is to the messenger, or perhaps, the pastor, "of the church in Ephesus."⁷ And then He begins by reminding them of His character and figuratively identifies Himself as, "The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand."⁸ In other words, the One who has authority and control over all of the churches. The word "holds" in the original language denotes the idea of the one who *safeguards*. And in this context the One who safeguards His servants is the author of this letter. So, "I am the one that controls and safeguards you."

And He says, also, "The One who walks among the seven golden lampstands."⁹ Again, the idea here is that He is the One that moves among the churches, whose lights are to shine forth as beacons of saving truth. He is the One who moves among the churches for the purpose of purifying them as well as enforcing His holy standards. And because of His constant vigil, and His intimate involvement in the churches He says this. And here is where we come to our first division. We see the *praise*. He says in verse two, "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance."¹⁰

"I know," in the original language, gives the idea of *progressive and complete knowledge*. It is the idea of omniscient observation from which nothing escapes. What does He know? What does He see? Well, He sees "your deeds" which is a term that would refer to those deeds that are good or bad. And He sees "your toil." "Toil" is the idea of laboring to the point of utter exhaustion. God sees all of this and He also says, "I

³ Revelation 1:19.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Revelation 2:1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Revelation 2:2.

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see your perseverance.” *Hupomone* (hoop-om-on-ay’) in the original language is a term used much in the New Testament and it carries with it the idea of *a courageous willingness to patiently endure and remain steadfast in the midst of profound spiritual conflict and great persecution.*

Now, you will remember that these early Christians were slandered greatly by other people, by their government. They were considered traitors to the state because they refused to worship Caesar as Lord. They would say, instead, “Jesus is Lord,” not Caesar. And they renounced the pantheon of Roman gods saying that *Jesus alone is Lord and in Him alone is the only hope of salvation and He alone will we worship.*

They were also considered to be cannibals because they ate the flesh and drank the blood of the Lord Jesus and people perverted that from their communion, the Lord’s Supper, and had them defined, therefore, as cannibals. And so you can imagine what people thought about these early Christians.

Down through history I might remind you that martyrs have been murdered not so much for their faith in Christ, but because of trumped up charges. They were murdered because they were called child molesters or because they were arsonists or because they were thieves or robbers and bigots and traitors, the dregs of society. And I might also add, dear friends, that we know little of this here in the United States, but it is coming and we are seeing it more and more. There is a tidal wave of persecution that we believe is coming our way.

Again, persecution not so much because of our faith in Christ, but rather because, from the perspective of the world around us, our faith is a narrow minded faith, it is a perverted faith because “everybody knows that when one truly has faith in Christ one is filled with love and tolerance for anything and everything.” And because we are considered narrow minded and therefore ignorant and arrogant, we are called hate mongers, bigots of the worst sort. In fact, if you say to most people today that “Christ is the only way to salvation” what happens? Immediately there is this inflamed hostility that triggers great violence among people.

Little by little we see our government outlawing the morality of the Word of God and even the true gospel of Christ demanding, instead, a kinder, gentler, more politically correct type of Christianity. Frankly, a gospel that has no power to save men’s souls.

And someday, I believe, as do many others if the Lord continues to tarry, that here in the United States we will see the same things happening to us as to many other Christians around the world. We will begin to lose our jobs and our homes. We will begin to find ourselves visiting our loved ones and our pastors in prisons. And then we will understand the meaning of *hupomone* (hoop-om-on-ay’), patience endurance. God saw this in the Ephesians.

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And I might also add something that is technical, but I think it is important. When the Lord says here, “I know *your* deeds and *your* toil,”¹¹ that is a possessive pronoun that is singular. This is something that you cannot see in the English language, English is unable to express that. But in Greek we can see this. And this indicates that ultimately the Lord is addressing the pastor here. He is the one who is responsible for the spiritual life of the church that he has been called to shepherd. And through the pastor he is addressing the entire congregation.

Now, notice the reason for their exhausting work and perseverance here in verse two. He says that He sees, “that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.”¹²

So here, obviously, we have a discerning church. This is the result of having a qualified group of men and certainly a teaching shepherd who is equipping them to understand sound doctrine as we read about in Ephesians four, the purpose of teaching shepherds and so forth. And as Paul said, “as a result we are no longer to be children.”¹³ Literally that is a term used to refer to *one who is unable to talk, but only babbles*. That is how a lot of Christians are. They just babble about things that are in the Word of God. They don’t really understand them. But Paul says, “If we have teaching shepherds we, as a result, are no longer going to be children, babblers,” “tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming,”¹⁴ and so forth.

You might also remember that Paul had warned them in Acts chapter 20 beginning in verse 28 to, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock.”¹⁵ And he went on to say that:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, [he says] be on the alert.¹⁶

You know, Scripture warns about these kind of men and even women. Jesus called them “wolves in sheep’s clothing.”¹⁷ And I want to remind you of the importance of that metaphorical imagery. Shepherds of those days would use the wool from their sheep and even the skins from their sheep to dress themselves, and so a shepherd was very easily identified because he would use the sheep for his attire. So the idea here is the Lord is saying that false shepherds are going to be “wolves in sheep’s clothing” meaning that they are going to look like real shepherds. They are going to look like real pastors

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Ephesians 4:14.

¹⁴ Ephesians 4:14.

¹⁵ Acts 20:28.

¹⁶ Acts 20:29-31.

¹⁷ See Matthew 7:15.

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because of their outward veneer. But the reality is they are wolves that will devour the sheep. So be on guard for them.

This shouldn't surprise us. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11 that "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore,"¹⁸ he went on to say, "it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness."¹⁹ And you will recall, as well, that Peter and Jude warned that these men would be deceitful. They will be greedy. They will be immoral and manipulative. They will exploit the people they claim to love and to serve.

The *Didache* which is the oldest known document of Church order that even dates back into these early, early church days, contains within it directives for instruction and for worship and for ministry. And even there we have warnings about these false apostles of that day. I wanted to quote one of their statements. Here is the warning. Quote, "Welcome every apostle on arriving as if he were the Lord, but he must not stay beyond one day. In case of necessity, however, the next day, too. But if he stays three days he is a false prophet. On departing, an apostle must not accept anything save sufficient food to carry him till his next lodging. If he asks for money he is a false prophet," end quote. In other words, the false prophets were in it for the money; and if that isn't a commentary of what we see today, I don't know what is.

So the Ephesian pastor and his congregation are praised for their tireless labor in combating these deceivers and their patient endurance under these trying circumstances in which they live where the culture and their government were accusing them of all manner of things and tested them severely.

And I want you to notice also in verse six that the Lord expands His commendation for their reaction to a specific group that had infiltrated the church. In verse six He says, "Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."²⁰

Frankly, we are uncertain who these people really were. We do know that there are a number of early church leaders who described them as a sect, an immoral, licentious, Antinomian—or in other words lawless—group of mystics or Agnostics. In fact, Irenaeus considered them a sect that followed one of the seven original men who served with Stephen, you will recall, in Acts six, a Jewish proselyte who later on apostatized, a man named Nicholas or Antioch.

We don't know for sure. This may have been the ring leader. Hippolytus, another Church father described this man Nicholas as a forerunner of Hymenaeus and Philetus who Paul condemned as heretics in 2 Timothy chapter two and verse 17. But we can't be dogmatic.

But we have some conclusive evidence about what they taught because they are also mentioned later on in the letter to Pergamum where they are characterized as false

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 11:14-15.

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:15.

²⁰ Revelation 2:6.

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teachers who deceived Christians and led them into immorality and other abominations.²¹ We will study that more when we get there. But regardless of who they were, we see here that God hated their deeds and so, too, the Ephesians hated them, unlike, by the way, the Church at Pergamum who tolerated them.

So God praised the Church at Ephesus here for their hard labor, for their patient endurance of the significant trials, their doctrinal discernment, their moral purity their unwillingness to tolerate these heretics. Verse three He says, “And you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary.”²² My, what a faithful, commendable, God honoring church.

“But”... Don’t you hate that word? You can just feel it coming. “But,” verse four, “I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”²³

And here, dear friends, we move from their *praise* to, secondly, their *problem*. “You have left your first love.”²⁴ Literally, “you have left your love, the first,” in the original language. The emphasis is on *first*, your *first love*. The idea of “left” here is a term that refers to forsaking something or laying something aside or departing from an original position. You have forsaken your first love. And love here is that *agape* love, that selfless sacrificial love that chooses to love without any demand for reciprocation. This is that supreme love that initiates, not one that merely reciprocates.

Evidently this was their first love. And first love here speaks of the first passionate, fervent, chaste love, the type of love, the type of pure love that a man would have for his newly wedded bride. You see an example of this, for example, in Jeremiah two verse two. The Lord speaks of this kind of love that first characterized Israel. He said, “I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, The love of your betrothals, Your following after Me in the wilderness, Through a land not sown.”²⁵ This is the first love.

Now I want you to notice here it doesn’t say that you have *lost* your first love, but rather you *left* it. There is some departure that has taken place here from an original position. Their service to the Lord had somehow become a greater priority than their intimate fellowship with Him. Their labor here had become mechanical. It, perhaps, had become a duty rather than a desire; more of a habit than a passion. And isn’t it easy for us all to fall into the habit of *kind of doing the Christian thing* here at Calvary Bible Church? What had been first was now secondary, maybe tertiary, maybe beyond.

May I remind you, 40 years have lapsed from those first days, a lot of time. The second generation, even the beginnings of a third generation are taking over. And we all know what it is like for young people to have things handed to them and not fully appreciate what was originally required. We see that even in our country, don’t we, the freedoms

²¹ See Revelation 2:14-15.

²² Revelation 2:3.

²³ Revelation 2:4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jeremiah 2:2.

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that we have. Most young people have no idea the cost for what we enjoy today. Therefore they are being systematically duped and eventually we are losing our freedoms. And we see this in churches all of the time.

But somehow a cold fog of a mechanical, kind of a dead orthodoxy, had now enveloped them. And, no doubt, some of the people within that church were tares amongst the wheat, unregenerate people. Some did not possess the same deep, fervent love for Christ (those true believers) that they originally had. Maybe that would include, as well, a diminishing love for each other, a diminishing love for the lost, the kind of love that was characteristic of that church when it was originally founded. Oh, they loved their doctrine. We see that. They are morally pure. They are intolerant of heretics here, but some of them did not love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and love their neighbors as much as they loved themselves.

And, of course, when this happens within a church—and this is where we are reading between the lines a bit here—but we know that this is consistent with what the Word of God teaches, when love begins to wane, that love for the Lord and for other people, petty bickering begins to set in a church. Gossip begins to occur. Cliques begin to develop. Personal preferences begin to take on the status of divine fiat. People become critical, demanding, hateful. Relationships begin to deteriorate. And even worse than all of this—and please hear this, folks—a genuine love for the lost begins to disappear.

The first love for Christ with the Ephesians was passionate as revealed in their ardent zeal for evangelism. Remember in Acts 19? Remember that great text where we read about how the Ephesians, both the Jews and the Greeks were literally running to Christ. I mean people by the hundreds if not thousands were being saved.

And verse 17 of Acts 19 we read:

The name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all.²⁶

And in verse 20 we read, “So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.”²⁷ That says a lot about their first love, does it not?

To grasp this concept may I ask you, those of you who are old enough to have had the joy of falling in love, those of us who know and love our spouses in particular, do you remember when you first fell in love? Do you remember that that lover of yours was the absolute object of your affection and he or she became the center of gravity around which your entire life would orbit? Remember when she—if I can speak of my beloved Nancy—was that all consuming passion? Remember when you then got married, and remember all of those things that surrounded those events, that selfless, sacrificial love

²⁶ Acts 19:17-19.

²⁷ Revelation 19:20.

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that you had for your beloved? Do you remember when you longed to hear her voice and to see her face and to hold her hand, when you longed to embrace that lover in the oneness even of sexual intimacy within the bounds of marriage? You remember all of those wonderful things? Beloved, this is the idea of a first love.

And, sadly, for many even in marriages, the cancer of selfishness and even the cancer of apathy gradually begins to set in and imperceptibly begins to corrupt the relationship and the honeymoon period gradually gives way to just kind of a roommate status. Somehow this is similar to what happened there at Ephesus, a departure from their first love. I know of many marriages where they now live as roommates. Oh, they still *love* each other, they just don't *like* each other very much. They don't enjoy each other very much. They kind of learn to tolerate one another, kind of live in separate worlds.

Now compare this, as well, with your first love when you came to Christ. Do you remember that? There are some amazing parallels here. Do you remember when your passion was to know Him and the power of His resurrection? Remember when there was absolutely nothing that would prevent you from coming to church? And yet now the slightest little thing will keep you away. Remember when even the smallest commandment would prick your heart and you would be broken before the Lord and you would gladly repent and begin to obey? But now it is as if nothing really moves you. Remember when you had that joyful countenance on your face and your heart was overflowing with praise and you longed to sing the wonderful songs of redemption? But now you have kind of grown cold and a bit sour and sullen and you complain and, frankly, you are kind of apathetic about those things. Remember when, once upon a time, wild horses couldn't keep you away from coming and praying together with the saints? But now you have just got more pressing priorities.

It is amazing, isn't it, how somehow imperceptibly our love can grow cold, how subtly our worship can become dead and perfunctory, just a duty, just something that we go through in terms of motions without really any passion or love. When that happens, beloved, we need to fan the embers of our love back into full flame. How do you do that?

Well, the Lord is merciful here. He always is. He always gives a divine remedy and we see that here, number three, in the *prescription*. The answer, if I can give it to you in two words, we have got to *remember* and *repent*. Notice verse five. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the [things] you did at first."²⁸

"Remember" is literally a term that... and grammatically is one that says, "Keep on remembering." The idea here is *never allow yourself to forget*. Keep on remembering from where you have fallen. The perfect tense here indicates and this verb indicates that this decline has occurred over a considerable period of time.

²⁸ Revelation 2:5.

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By the way, as a foot note, that is further support for a later dating of the Apocalypse that would rule out this idea that it was written for people in that first century and it was all fulfilled in AD 70.

Beloved, I want you to remember something. Whenever we consider our sin, please know that our habits of sin, especially those life-dominating sins, are things that develop imperceptibly over time. They are not the types of the things that you wake up one day and just say, “You know what? I am just going to start doing this stupid thing that is going to destroy my life.” It begins slowly, many times unwittingly. Satan is a deceiver. Sin is tempting. “Remember... from where you have fallen.”²⁹

You know, it is kind of like the way wind erodes rock. Have you ever been out in the deserts and seen these great sandstone rocks that have these incredible looks to them because the wind has, over time eroded them. That is the way sin works.

See, the idea here is that the Lord is saying, “you know, you once had a pure love that resided up high upon a mountain. But now it has fallen into some dark valley below. I want you to remember and keep on remembering what that used to look like.” And we begin to deal with this decline by remembering where we once were and what we once did. Folks, it is kind of like the prodigal son. We have lost our way and we must return. We have got to remember what we departed from.

Beloved, again, think about the past when you first came to Christ. Remember when you longed to know the Lord. Remember when you were consumed with personal purity, when you had an insatiable appetite for the Word of God, when you couldn’t wait to get to the next Bible study, when you studied the Word, when you actually, as I say, took notes in church, when you loved to fellowship, you had a real burden for the lost, when you wouldn’t miss an opportunity to share the gospel of Christ with someone.

A fairly new believer in this church has repeatedly asked me on Wednesday nights when he comes in, he says, “Where is everybody? Why aren’t they here to hear the Word and to be nourished and to grow and to come and to pray with the saints? Where is everybody?” And my answer is, “Well, you know, a lot of people have legitimate excuses. I understand that. But, quite frankly, the reason for many, they are not here because they have *left their first love*. They have greater priorities.”

You know, as we pensively reflect upon our first love we have to remember the things that we did with such love and such passion. And when you think about it in those days, it was the result of an inner drive, an attitude, not some external pressure. Nobody had to kind of force you and as we would say here in the South, *guilt and shame* you to love the Lord and to live consistently with that love. Our love for Christ and love for others was just a natural consuming passion of our heart.

I would ask you, dear friends, does this describe you? Remember I told you earlier we would need to examine our hearts. And I know right now because of your flesh there are

²⁹ Ibid.

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1000 reasons that your mind is now giving you that will cause you to rationalize all this away, to justify your own sin. We have communion here in the church and in all churches for the purpose of what? *Remembering*. How easy it is to unwittingly forsake our first love. Think what a heart breaking reality that would be to a spouse in a marriage. Beloved, how much more so a heart breaking reality to the God who loved us while we were yet sinners?

So this is the Lord's admonition to the Ephesians and to all of us. But notice he adds here, fourthly, the *punishment*. In other words, "if you are not going to remember and repent," He says in verse five, "Or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent."³⁰

Now here, dear friends, is sense of urgency. "Unless," He is saying, "there is a decisive change of heart and action, I am going to come to you in divine judgment and I am going to remove your lampstand out of its place." In other words, "I am going to extinguish the flame of the Spirit of God that empowers you, that flame that once caused you to blaze forth with truth and with power, with a love for Christ. And as a church you are going to cease to exist."

Oh, child of God, please hear this. A loveless Christian grieves the Holy Spirit and quenches the Holy Spirit. Likewise, a loveless church will end up becoming a part of a loveless church and a loveless church will grieve the Holy Spirit and quench the Holy Spirit. Like the temple of Jerusalem, remember, in Ezekiel 11? Oh, you may still have a visible presence. You may have a place to meet. You may even increase in numbers, and many dead churches are growing like crazy in numbers. But the glory of God will no longer reside in you. *Ichabod* will be written across the front door which means *the glory has departed*. The lampstand of your power and testimony will be removed as an act of divine judgment.

You know, I have seen this happen over the years in churches. I have been a part of churches like that, churches that exist in name only, but they are bereft of divine power. They are devoid of the glory of God. There is no love. It is just kind of a phony superficial, cold, mechanical, cliquish social club. That is all it is because they have forsaken their first love, their supreme love for Christ. And all that remains is a hollow shell of what it once was. And how many Christians can be similarly characterized? No power, no real passion, no real testimony because they have no real love. What a pitiful sight.

But the Lord gives a promise, fifthly, in verse seven. He says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*."³¹ Notice "churches" is plural. It indicates here the universal invitation and application of His words to all churches. "Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes."³² That is a reference that

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Revelation 2:7.

³² Ibid.

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we see used over and over to refer to genuine believers, “To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.”³³

“The tree of life,” a marvelous concept from the Word of God, it takes us all the way back to Genesis chapter two and verse nine. You will remember that the tree of life existed in the Garden of Eden. It was a tree that symbolized eternal life from which Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat. But you recall that Adam and Eve sinned and God drove them out of the garden. And in chapter three of Genesis in verse 24 we read that, “at the east of the garden of Eden [God] stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life.”³⁴

Beloved, this was an act of divine mercy. It protected them from eating at that forbidden tree and thus eternally living in their fallen and cursed condition. The earthly tree of life is obviously gone. No doubt the flood took it away. But its heavenly counterpart does exist in the paradise of God. In fact, John describes it later on in Revelation 22 and verse two. We read there, “On either side of the river,”³⁵ which is referring to the one that flows from the throne of God, “On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”³⁶ He went on to say in verse 14, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.”³⁷

Herein, dear friends, is the promise, the magnificent promise that the Lord gives overcomers, a paradise where they will dwell with God in a new heaven and a new earth. And, oh, dear friends, all of you who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, I would ask you again, to hear and heed the warning to the Church at Ephesus. Evidently they did not remember and repent because God removed their lampstand and they disappeared like countless other churches.

So may I leave you with this thought? Have you left your first love?

Maybe I could also add: Have you ever experienced that first love? If not, today I would plead with you to come to the Lord Jesus Christ, recognize your sin and your hopeless condition and cry out to Him to save you and by His grace He will. He will transform your heart and your mind and your life.

Let's pray together.

Father, as we examine this text I find myself reeling under its weight as I am sure we all do because certainly in ways we have all forsaken our first love. I pray, Lord, that you will forgive us. I pray that you will, by your mercy and grace, fan the embers of our love

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Genesis 3:24.

³⁵ Revelation 22:2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Revelation 22:14.

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which have grown cold that we might blaze forth once again with the full flame of love for you. Lord, we don't want to be a loveless people. We don't want to be a loveless church. And so I pray that you will bring conviction to our hearts and that this day we will commit ourselves decisively with genuine repentance to go back and do the deeds that we did originally that You might be glorified and we might experience the joy of the Lord in our hearts and in this place. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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