

Main Idea: In Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7, our Lord has three things to say to a church that has left its first love.

- I. Christ commends the church (1-3).
 - A. We learn something about Christ (1).
 1. He is strong.
 2. He is sovereign.
 - B. We learn something about the church (2-3).
 1. It was dynamic.
 2. It was disciplined.
 3. It was discerning.
 4. It was diligent.
- II. Christ confronts the church (4).
 - A. It happens when our love for Christ grows cold.
 - B. It happens when our love for Christ's people grows cold.
- III. Christ calls the church to change (5-7).
 - A. What must the church do? (5)
 1. We must remember.
 2. We must repent.
 3. We must repeat.
 - B. What must the individual do? (7)
 1. We must hear.
 2. We must heed.

A Needed Prayer: “Guard me from the tendency to substitute things for You.”

I need this message. It's that simple. And I'm convinced that as a church family, *we* need it. I want to talk with you about a problem that pastors face—at least this one does. And that established churches face, like ours. Jesus actually confronted this problem when He sent a message to a solid, established church many years ago and told them, “*I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love.*”

Forsaken. That means you had something once that you've since left behind. And what is it?

Your first love, says Jesus. Not just love, but the kind of love that you demonstrated when you first came to know Me. There was something in your heart and life *then* that is just a distant memory *now*.

Is that serious? Jesus says it is. *I hold this against you*, He says. My friends, I can think of few things worse than having the Savior say that He is holding something *against you*.

I want us to talk about the problem of *forsaking our first love*. How does it happen? How can you tell if it's happened in your life? And if it has, how do you fix the problem? What does a pastor, or church, or church member who has forsaken his first love need to do to get it back?

Our gracious Lord tells us in plain terms in a letter He sent to a church whose love had grown cold. We find the letter in Revelation 2.

Often when we think of the book of Revelation, we think of future events, and so we should for chapters 4-22 unveil for us what the Lord will do with this world in the future. But in Revelation 2-3, we find seven letters that the Risen Christ sent to seven churches, real churches in real cities in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message has been adapted from a sermon preached as part of a series on the seven letters in Revelation 2-3 previously delivered at WBC in July/August 2005.

What is the purpose of these letters? In essence, there are two. *First, these seven letters are designed to reveal Christ.* That is the purpose of the book at large. It is the revelation of the Person and work of Jesus Christ (see 1:1). In fact, each of these seven letters begins with a description of Christ. Since these letters reveal Christ, the main benefit of this study is it will help us to know Christ better.

Secondly, these seven letters are designed to revive the Church. Though these letters were written to seven particular local churches that no longer exist, we know they apply to us because each letter ends with this charge (see 2:7, 11, 17, etc.), “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Notice the plural “churches.” What Jesus said to the church at Ephesus, He wanted the other churches to hearken. These are letters which can revive us as a church!

We’re going to look at the first letter, a letter Jesus sent to a church that had forsaken its first love. In Revelation 2:1-7, the Lord gave a three-part message to the church at Ephesus which shows us exactly what we must do to regain our first love.

I. Christ commends the church (1-3).

Verse 1—“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 first thing that strikes us about this letter is the symbolic language--the “angels,” the “stars,” the “golden lampstands.” What do these symbols mean? Look back to 1:20 and we’ll find out: “The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

So the lampstands represent the seven churches in Asia Minor. And who is the “angel” of the church? By definition, the word *angelo* means “messenger.” Some have suggested it could refer to the church’s guardian angel, or possibly to the prevailing spirit of the church.² More likely, it refers to the leader or servant or delegate of the church that first received the letter from John (who was on Patmos) and took it back to the church in Ephesus.³

Can you imagine that church service when the messenger said, “Brothers and sisters, we just received a message from our Savior about the end times, and at the beginning of it He sent us a personal letter!”

In the first three verses, Christ commends the church at Ephesus, referring to it as a “lampstand.” As Leon Morris rightly observes (57), “It is worth noting that the churches are no more than ‘lampstands’. The light is Christ, and they are to show Him forth.” As we look at this section we’ll learn two things...

A. We learn something about Christ (1). The risen, glorified Christ is speaking to His church here, and notice how He describes Himself in verse 1, “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” The description highlights two traits of Christ.

1. He is strong. How strong? He “holds” the seven stars in His hand. The verb means “to be strong, to rule.” It means that Christ has complete control over His church.

² Mounce, 85

³ See John MacArthur’s helpful explanation in his message on Revelation 2, http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/80-292_Rekindling-Your-Love-for-Christ

2. *He is sovereign.* John saw Jesus walking in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. That means He's ever present and in control. Jesus is in heaven at the Father's right hand, but He's also walking in the midst of His churches. He knows us, He knows our condition.

He told the Ephesian church, "I know your works (2:2)." He told the church at Smyrna, "I know your afflictions and your poverty (2:9)." He told the flock at Pergamum, "I know where you live...yet you remain true to my name (2:13)." He said the same thing to the other four churches as well, "I know...I know...I know...I know."

Listen. The Lord who died to redeem us is both strong and sovereign. He misses nothing. He knows what we're facing. He knows what we're doing. He also knows what we are *not* doing.

B. We learn something about the church (2-3). "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."

As history verifies, the church at Ephesus was a very significant church. The city of Ephesus itself was the most influential city in the region. A quarter of a million people lived there.⁴ It was the Gateway of Asia, and was thus a great trade city. The city had a major stadium, marketplace, and theater (which seated 25,000 persons). The imperial cult was there. So was the Temple of Artemis (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). That a church was started there was nothing short of the sovereign intervention of God.

The Ephesian church had enjoyed great leadership. Apparently, the Lord used Aquila and Priscilla to start the church around AD 52 (Acts 18:18-22). Paul spent a couple of years there (Acts 19). Timothy served there (1 Tim 1:3). So did the apostle John. Tradition says John took Mary, the mother of Jesus, to Ephesus, and she lived there until her death.

Frankly, the Lord's commendation of this church is quite impressive. We can summarize four qualities which were true of the church at Ephesus.

1. *It was dynamic.* In verse 2, Jesus observed this about the church, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." [KJV "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience"]. Things were happening at the church in Ephesus! The members were involved in Christian service. They were workers. The word "labor" means "toil to the point of exhaustion." This was a serving church. If you were a pew-sitter, you didn't feel comfortable in the First Church of Ephesus.

2. *It was disciplined.* The phrase, "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men" [KJV "and how thou canst not bear those who are evil"] indicates this was a church that took purity seriously. They would not tolerate evil in their midst, and apparently, practiced discipline to keep the church pure. If a member refused to repent and forsake of known sin, he was removed from membership, just as the Lord had instructed in Matthew 18.

3. *It was discerning.* Years earlier, Paul had warned the Ephesian elders to look out for false teachers that would try to infiltrate their ranks (Acts 20:28-31). John had taught them to "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1-6). And they took heed. Jesus commends them in verse 2, "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 [KJV 'liars']."

⁴ Mounce, 85

Here was a church that practiced separation. They rooted out heresy. Jesus gives a specific example on this in verse 6, “But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

Who were these Nicolaitans? We're not told. They're mentioned in the letter to Pergamum (2:15). Apparently, they were compromisers. They were people who tried to mix Christianity with the common idolatry and loose living of their day. They paraded under the banner of Christian "liberty".⁵ But the Ephesian church was discerning, and wouldn't tolerate such compromise. They hated it, and took steps to weed it out. No winking at sin in their church!

But not only was the church dynamic, disciplined, and discerning...

4. *It was diligent.* It's not easy to stand for the truth in a society that champions relativism. But the Ephesians did, and we read in verse 3, “You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary [KJV ‘hast not fainted’].” When others might have thrown in the towel, the Ephesians hung in there for Christ. At a time when the hot fires of persecution were making life uncomfortable for Christians, this church persevered and endured.

Pretty impressive, huh? Just imagine that you lived in the first century in Asia Minor and were looking for a church. You looked all over but just weren't satisfied. Until someone told you about the church at Ephesus. Here was a church that was dynamic (the people were hard workers), disciplined (they didn't tolerate sin in their midst), discerning (they knew how to search the Scriptures to root out heresy), and diligent (they were in it for the long haul). What more could you want?! The perfect church, right?

Not so fast. Herein lies one of our great problems. We measure churches by what they DO, but Christ's assessment goes much deeper. You say, "Pastor, I don't follow. Are you saying a church can have great youth programs, a solid doctrinal statement, vibrant activities for singles and seniors, top notch music ministries, a growing budget for missions, can preach against sin, can stand against heresy, and still be lacking?" The answer is, "No, not simply lacking. It's worse than that. A church can be doing all these things and be on the verge of extinction."

And lest you think I'm exaggerating, let's move ahead to the second part of the letter. First, Christ commends the church. Then...

II. Christ confronts the church (4).

Verse 4—“Yet I hold this against you [KJV ‘I have somewhat against thee’]: You have forsaken your first love [KJV ‘thou hast left thy first love’].”

Those are stinging words, "You have left your first love." The Greek term *aphiemi* means “to forsake, to let go.” It's actually translated “divorce” in 1 Corinthians 7:11. I've never met a couple in crisis yet that entered marriage planning to divorce each other. But as time passed, something happened to their love. And the same thing happened to this church. The order in the Greek sentence is emphatic. Jesus says, “Your first love you have left.”

Put that into context. Thirty-five years earlier Paul commended this same church, saying he never stopped giving thanks for them because of their faith in Christ and love for the saints (Eph 1:15-16). But that was then, thirty-five years ago. Now those original church members are older, plus there's brand new crop of younger church members

⁵ Mounce, 90

present, second generation Christians. Oh, their doctrinal statement is still sound, and their programs are running like a machine, but something's missing.

They didn't lose it either. Jesus says they *left* it. They had forsaken their first love.

I remember like it was yesterday the evening I asked the treasured person who is now my wife to marry me. I couldn't go through an hour without thinking about her. My mind was consumed with the thought of spending my life with, and serving God with this person that I had come to love. There was no one outside of the Lord Himself that I valued more, that I wanted to be with more than her. Why? Because I loved her.

Unfortunately, as time passes we are prone to take for granted those we once loved with great zeal. What happens in marriage can happen in our relationship with the Lord.

Israel had the same heart problem. In the sixth century B.C. God had this to say to His wayward people in Jeremiah 2:2, "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: 'I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.'"

Israel *used to* love the Lord...past tense. But her love went cold.

And God challenged her in Jeremiah 2:5, "This is what the LORD says: 'What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.'"

By the way, there is no indirect object in Christ's confrontation. He says, "You have forsaken your first love." But that raises the question, "First love *for whom?*" Who were the Ephesian Christians failing to love? Jesus doesn't specify. There are two possibilities and in my estimation, both are true.

Here's the first indicator that we have left our first love...

A. It happens when our love for Christ grows cold. Again, Jesus didn't say they "lost" their first love, but that they "had forsaken" [KJV "left"] it. They had it but put it on the shelf.

First love is sort of like the honeymoon love.⁶ When you first get married everything is new and you want to experience life with that precious partner God gave you. True, in marriage, our love deepens the longer we're together [at least it should], but we should never forget the wonder of those early days.

And yet, if we're careful, we do lose the wonder. We take our spouse for granted. Oh, we still love him or her (or at least we tell ourselves we do), but something's changed.

Yet as bad as that is, this is far worse. When we do it to Christ.

How does it happen? Warren Wiersbe explains, "The Ephesian believers were so busy maintaining their separation that they were neglecting adoration. Labor is no substitute for love; neither is purity a substitute for passion. The church must have both if it is to please Him."⁷

Answer this. Do you have the same enthusiasm for Christ today as on the day He saved you? I didn't ask, "Are you serving Him?" Serving Christ is never to be a substitute for loving Christ. The question is, "Do you love Him?"

Let me share a pastoral observation with you. One of the last things to go before a person drops out of church is their service. On the other hand, one of the first things to go is their joyful participation in the worship services. I've seen it again and again in

⁶ Wiersbe, 572

⁷ Wiersbe, 572

twenty-three years of pastoring. The worship goes first. The service lingers on much longer (because people see their service, or lack of it). I don't see them in the worship services, or if they come they're not consistent nor fully engaged. But they still do their jobs—work in the nursery, teach their children's class, fill their music slot, etc. Once that happens, it's only a matter of time.

Friends, that's one of the reasons why I urge you to make the corporate worship of Christ a top priority in your life. Please don't miss worship services for family events, or to do Christian service. Will there be exceptions? Sure. Just make sure they are exceptions. He deserves our worship and we need it. We are in trouble when we forsake our first love for Christ.

There's another way we can forsake our first love.

B. It happens when our love for Christ's people grows cold. The fact is, love for Christ and love for His people go hand in hand. One is proof of the other. What's more, if you lack one you will in turn lack the other.

Remember, the Ephesian church was committed to rooting out heresy. That's good, but therein may lie the problem as well. William Barclay makes an interesting suggestion, "It may well be that heresy-hunting had killed love and orthodoxy had been achieved at the price of fellowship."⁸ It's possible that the Ephesian church was so militant to get rid of heretics that an atmosphere of suspicion developed, a suspicion that strangled the church members' love for each other.

Let's chew on a couple of implications for a moment. First, good teaching doesn't guarantee a church will remain on fire for God. That's certainly not an endorsement for bad teaching, but it is vital to remember that solid teaching isn't enough. The Ephesians enjoyed some of the greatest teaching ever, from apostles like Paul and John. Good teaching? The best. Yet they abandoned their first love.

Second, activity is no substitute for intimacy. The church at Ephesus was doing a lot of good things, but something was missing. Not something small. Not something optional. Something absolutely essential. *Their first love was gone.*

Do you know what is sad? They're not the last church to forsake it.

It's true. Some churches (and Christians) are known more for what they are AGAINST than for their love for Christ and His people.

Is losing first-love a serious problem? It certainly is. In verse 5, Jesus said, "If you don't repent and get your first love back, I'm going to come and remove your lampstand." No lampstand means no light which means no more influence in a dark world.

Beloved, a church that stops loving Christ and each other will soon lose its distinctive power, and in time will become extinct. Jesus warned about this when He gave this prediction in Matthew 24:12-13, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."

What's the solution? Here's the third part of the Lord's message...

III. Christ calls the church to change (5-7).

Change must take place on two fronts and Jesus addresses them both.

A. What must the church do? (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." If we have left our first love and want to get it back, we need to take three steps.

⁸ Barclay, p. 64

1. *We must remember.* Verse 5 says, “Remember the height from which you have fallen!” KJV—“Remember... from where thou art fallen.” Remember what? Remember the height, the thrill Jesus was in your life when you first met Him. Do some sacred reflection, and remember (lit. "keep on remembering").

Let's start here. Remember what He did for us. He left heaven, became a man, went into Jerusalem, and died on a cruel cross for us. He took our sin upon Himself. He took our judgment, our pain, our loss, our hell. He took it. Remember. Remember what He did.

Remember how He then came to us, opened our eyes, and gave us faith to believe in Him. Remember. Remember how He made us new. He gave us a new heart and a new start in life.

And remember how thrilled we were with Him. Remember!

2. *We must repent.* That's the word Jesus uses in verse 5, “Repent!” To repent means to change your mind and course. If we have left our first love, it means we have started settling for substitutes. Maybe the substitutes are good things, but they must go. We must confess our sin to the Lord.

Acts 17:30 states, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

The verb “remember” is present tense, whereas “repent” is aorist. The first indicates a continuous attitude, the second a decisive break. In other words, the church needed to constantly call to remembrance, but choose to make a break in a decisive moment.

Friends, if we're going to recapture a forsaken first love we must remember—that is, look back, reflect on what we once had. Then we must repent—do a 180, no more business as usual. What's more...

3. *We must repeat.* In verse 5 Jesus exhorts, “Do the things you did at first [KJV ‘Do the first works’].” Notice the Ephesians were "doing" but NOT doing the "first works." What are the first works they needed to rediscover?

Think back. When you first became a Christian, what things did you do? One of the first things you did was to get baptized, as we'll see a brother do in a few moments. By entering the waters of baptism you made it clear who you believed in and belonged to and intended to live for.

But what else did you do at first? Think back. You thought about the Lord, for sure. You thought about Him all the time, in fact. How could you not? You thought about how He died for you, in your place, for your sin. You thought about what He suffered on the cross, how He took away your guilt, how He conquered the grave and gave you eternal life.

And then, of course, you delighted to communicate with Him. You talked to Him in prayer, and you read His Word so He could talk to you. You went to church as often as you could, not out of duty, because You were so thankful for the new life He'd given you. You got excited about worshipping Him. You told other people about Him and what He had done for you. You thought about heaven and what it will be like to see Him. That's what you did.

So if that's what you *did*, Jesus says to *do it again*. If your first love has grown cold, *repeat!* Go back and do what you did at the beginning. Do the first works. Make prayer and Bible study a priority. Make church a priority. Make the worship of Christ a priority. Make witnessing and meditation a priority.

What's the condition of your love? Paul made the church's love life a matter of prayer in Philippians 1:9, “And this is my prayer: that *your love may abound* more and

more in knowledge and depth of insight..." Our love for Christ and each other is supposed to grow.

And the Lord sees it, too. Hebrews 6:10 declares, "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and *the love you have shown him* as you have helped his people and continue to help them."

Yes, the church today needs folks who will take action to recapture their first love for Christ. Remember, a church that loses its love will soon lose its light.⁹

Jesus offered a sober warning in verse 5, "...If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." Sadly, in time the Lord did remove the Ephesian church's lampstand. Not only the church but the city eventually vanished. What once was a great church has ceased to exist!

Let the loveless church beware and take heed to Paul's reminder in 1 Corinthians 13:2, "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 have not love*, I am nothing."

After confronting the church Jesus offered this word of encouragement in verse 6, "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." It's good to hate sin. They'd been doing that and Jesus was pleased. Now they needed to focus on their forsaken love with the same tenacity.

B. What must the individual do? (7) You may wonder, "Are you sure this letter applies to us?" Look at verse 7, "He who has an ear (do you have an ear?!), let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." What must we do as individuals?

1. *We must hear.* This letter is for us. If we've left our first-love, we too need to remember, repent, and repeat.

2. *We must heed.* In verse 7 Jesus gives this conditional promise, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in [KJV 'in the midst of'] the paradise of God." The tree of life, that's what Adam forfeited. But here Jesus offers it to His people.

God calls us to be overcomers. We must not let the world (nor lukewarm Christians) sap us of our first love. We need to choose today to be radical in our love for Christ. Without love, we cease to be a church.

In his book, *Seasons of Life*, Chuck Swindoll records a prayer he prayed that we need to pray. Here it is: "Lord, keep my heart warm. Stop me when I rev my motor and get to moving too fast toward stuff I think will make me happy. Guard me from this stupid tendency to substitute things for You."

Has your love for Christ gone cold? Have you forsaken your first love? We need to be praying this prayer, brothers and sisters. "Oh Lord, guard me from the tendency to substitute things for You."

Response Time: Let's sing songs of worship to Christ...

#363 "More Love to Thee, O Christ"

#364 "My Jesus, I Love Thee"

Baptism: Adam Bradley

⁹ Wiersbe, 572