

Main Idea: In Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7, our Lord shares three observations we need to hearken.

- I. Christ commends the church (1-3).
 - A. What do we learn about Christ? (1)
 - 1. He is strong.
 - 2. He is sovereign.
 - B. What do we learn 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."

In his book, *Seasons of Life*, Chuck Swindoll writes of the following experience (382), "It happened in a large, seventy-five-year-old stone house on the west side of Houston. A massive stairway led up to several bedrooms. The den down below was done in rough-hewn boards with soft leather chairs and a couple of matching sofas. The wet bar had been converted into a small library, including a shelf of tape recordings and a multiple speaker sound system. The idea place to spend a weekend...unfortunately, my wife and I were there just for the evening...

"An easy, relaxing atmosphere made you want to kick off your shoes and run your fingers over the thick, black hair of the sleeping Labrador retriever sprawled across the hearth of a crackling fireplace. The host, a lifelong Christian friend, leaned his broad shoulders against the mantle as he told of the bass that got away last week. While the guys chided him loudly for exaggerating ("it had to weigh ten to twelve pounds!"), my eyes ran a horizontal path across the carved message on the mantle. The room was too dark to read what it said from where I sat. I was intrigued and strangely drawn from my overstuffed chair to get a closer look.

"I ran my fingers along the outline of each letter as my lips silently formed the words: IF YOUR HEART IS COLD, MY FIRE CANNOT WARM IT."

Then Swindoll made this comment, "HMMMMM,' I thought, 'how true.' Fireplaces don't warm hearts. Neither does fine furniture nor a four-car garage nor a full stomach nor a job with a six-figure salary. No, a cold heart can be warmed only by the fire of the living God."

Is it possible for a Christian's love to grow cold? Sadly, yes...

When a man says, "It's just not there any more," I know his love for his wife has grown cold. When an 17 year old grits her teeth and says, "I'm leaving my family.

*** 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.

There's got to be more to life than this," I know that her love has grown cold. Thankfully, by the grace of Christ love grown cold can be rekindled.

Can our love for God grow cold? We know too well that it can. What causes that to happen and what should we do when it does? Our gracious Lord tells us in plain terms in Revelation 2 in a letter He sent to a church whose love had grown cold.

New Series: This morning, we are beginning a new series entitled, "Mail from the Lord." Our text is The Revelation of Jesus Christ, chapters two and three. 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 to seven churches. These were real churches in real cities in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergammum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each of these churches received mail from the Lord.

Who wrote Revelation? The apostle John did in behalf of Jesus. Notice 1:4, "John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia." Verse 5 continues, "And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness."

How did John obtain this message from Jesus? Observe 1:9-10, "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet..."

Beginning today we're going to begin to investigate these seven letters, one per week. But lest we miss the forest for the trees, lest we get preoccupied with the details and go off on rabbit trails and miss the heart of Jesus' message, let's talk about a big-picture question. What is the purpose of these letters? The intent is twofold:

1. 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.

2. These seven letters are designed to revive the Church.

Though these letters were written to seven particular local churches that no longer exist, they apply to us. 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!

This morning, in the first letter, we'll find out what we should do when our love grows cold. In Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7, our Lord gave a three-part message to the church, a message we need to hearken.

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.” The lampstands represent the seven churches in Asia Minor. Who is the "angel" of the church? By definition, the word *angelo* means "messenger." Some have suggested it could refer to the guardian angel. More likely is that it refers to the leader of the church, or possibly to the prevailing spirit of the church.¹

In the first three verses, Christ commends the church at Ephesus. Leon Morris rightly points out (57), "It is worth noting that the churches are no more than 'lampstands'. The light is Christ, and they are to show Him forth." Let's look at this section with two questions in mind.

A. What do we learn about Christ? (1)

The Risen, glorified Christ is speaking to His church. 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." This description reveals 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. 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.

Do you know what He told each of the seven churches? To the Ephesian church, "I know your works (2:2)." To church at Smyrna, "I know your afflictions and your poverty (2:9)." To Pergamum, "I know where you live...yet you remain true to my name (2:13)." And to the other four as well, "I know...I know...I know...I know."

Listen. The Lord Jesus Christ is both strong and sovereign. He misses nothing. He knows our pain. When nobody else notices, He knows what we did for Him. He also knows what we should have done for Him, but chose not to.

B. What do we learn about the church? (2-3)

Verses 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."

History verifies that 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.² 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

¹ Mounce, 85

² Mounce, 85

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. No doubt, they had the best programs in town.

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 quite possibly, practiced discipline to keep the church pure. This was a disciplined church that took a stand against evil.

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']."

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 sure. 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".³ 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!

4. It was diligent.

It's not easy to stand for the truth in a world that champions relativism and diversity. 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.

Consider a hypothetical situation. Imagine 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, disciplined, discerning, and diligent. What more could you want?! The perfect church, right?

Hold on. Herein lies one of our great problems. We measure churches by what they DO. Christ measures them by what they ARE first. You say, "Pastor, I don't follow. Are you saying a church can have great youth programs, a great doctrinal statement, great activities for senior saints, a great choir, a great budget for missions, can preach against

³ Mounce, 90

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."

Whoa! Extinction? How can that be? Lest you think I'm exaggerating, let's move ahead in the letter. Let's consider the second part of Jesus' message.

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 translated "divorce" in 1 Corinthians 7:11. The order here in the Greek is emphatic, "Your first love you have left."

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 35 years ago. These are now second generation Christians in Ephesus. They were still doctrinally sound, but something had happened to their love.

It's true that the Ephesian church had a lot going for it. The positive marks were there. But those were externals. Jesus saw something else. They had heart trouble. They had abandoned their first love. What does that mean?

I remember like it was yesterday the day I asked the treasured girl who is now my wife to marry me. I could not 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 loved. 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, after awhile, many of us 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. Jesus says, "You have forsaken your first love." But that raises the question, "First love *for whom?*" Who were the Ephesian Christians failing to love? The text doesn't specify. There are two possibilities and in my estimation, both are legitimate.

Let me rephrase the question... How do we leave our first love? We can do it in two ways.

A. It happens when our love for Christ grows cold.

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 the honeymoon love.⁴ When you're first 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, that can happen. 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.

That can happen to our love for Christ. Warren Wiersbe offers this stunning insight, "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."⁵

Answer this. Do you have the same enthusiasm for Christ as the day you were saved? Serving God is not to be a substitute for loving God.

There's another way we can forsake our first love. First, it happens when our love for Christ grows cold.

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."⁶ 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...

⁴ Wiersbe, 572

⁵ Wiersbe, 572

⁶ Barclay, p. 64

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)

Verse 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.

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").

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.

Beloved, 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? You thought about the Lord! You thought about Him all the time, in fact. 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 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 would be like to see Him. That’s what you did.

So if that’s what you *did*, Jesus says *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 and worship 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.⁷

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.

At the beginning of this message, I shared Chuck Swindoll's story of his experience at his friend's fireplace mantle, where he read the words, "If your heart is cold, my fire cannot warm it." Listen to what Swindoll did after he read that proverb (382-3), "I settled back down, stayed quiet, and mused over those thoughts. I even prayed as I stared into the fire: 'Lord, keep my heart warm. Stop me when I rev my motor and get to moving too fast toward stuff I think will make my 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?

A Needed Prayer: “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”

#529 “O How I Love Jesus”

⁷ Wiersbe, 572