

Intro: 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, "Hmmmmmm,' 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? When a man across my desk says to me, "It's just not there any more," I know his love for his wife has grown cold. When an elderly woman mumbles from her convalescent center bed, "I don't have any reason to keep living," I know that her love for life has grown cold.

But can our love for God grow cold? We know too well that it can. What should we do when our love grows cold? Our Lord tells us in Revelation 2, in the letter He wrote to the church at Ephesus.

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 which are in Asia." V 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, who also am your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the

***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.

kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice."

For the next 7 weeks we'll investigate these 7 letters. 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 this question. What is the purpose of these letters? The purpose 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 that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto 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.

Proposition: 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.

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

V 1 "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus, write." 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 seven stars are the angels of the seven churches; and the seven lampstands which thou sawest are the seven churches." The lampstands represent the seven churches in Asia Minor. Who is the "angel" of the church? By definition, the word 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 (Mounce, 85).

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, "These things saith He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands." V 1 reveals two traits of Christ.

1. He is 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.

He walks 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 thy works (2:2)." To church at Smyrna, "I know thy works (2:9)." To Pergamum, "I know thy works (2:13)." And to the other four as well, "I know thy works."

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)

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 (Mounce, 85). 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 v 2, Jesus observed this about the church, "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, "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 "try the spirits" (1 Jn 4:1-6). And they took heed. Jesus commends them in v 2, "Thou hast tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars."

Here was a church that rooted out heresy! They practiced separation. Jesus gives a specific example on this in v 6, "But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Who were the 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" (Mounce, 90). But the Ephesian church was discerning, and wouldn't tolerate such compromise. They hated it, and took steps to weed it out.

4. It was diligent.

It's not easy to stand for the truth in a world of compromise. But the Ephesians did, and we read in v 3, "And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and 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 1st 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?! 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 sin, can stand against heresy, and still be lacking?" The answer is, "No. It's worse than that. A church can be doing all these things and be on the verge of extinction."

How can that be? We find out by considering Jesus' second observation.

II. Christ confronts the church (4).

V 4 "Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." Those are stinging words, "You have left your first love." True, the Ephesian church had a lot going for it. The positive marks were there. But those were externals. 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. 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 "left" it. First love is the honeymoon love (Wiersbe, 572). True, in marriage, our love deepens the longer we're together, but we should never lose the excitement and awe of those early days.

Warren Wiersbe offers this stunning insight (572), "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." Do you have the same enthusiasm for Christ as the day you were saved? Serving God is no substitute for loving God.

There's another way our first love can grow cold.

B. It happens when our love for Christ's people grows cold.

William Barclay makes an interesting suggestion (64), "It may well be that heresy-hunting had killed love and orthodoxy had been achieved at the price of fellowship." The Ephesian church was so militant to get rid of heretics that an atmosphere of suspicion developed. A suspicion that strangled their love for each other.

Allow me to make a couple of applications. First, good teaching doesn't guarantee a church will remain on fire for God (which is certainly not an endorsement for bad teaching!). The Ephesians enjoyed some of the greatest teaching ever, from apostles like Paul and John, yet they abandoned their first love. Second, activity is no substitute for intimacy. The church at Ephesus was doing a lot of good, but the first love was gone. Do you know what is sad? 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 v 5, Jesus said, "If you don't repent and get your first love back, I'm going to come and remove your lampstand." What's the solution?

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

Change must take place on two fronts...

A. What must the church do? (5)

If we have left our first love and want to get it back, we need to take three steps.

1. *We must remember.*

V 5 says, "Remember, therefore, 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.*

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.

3. *We must repeat.*

In v 5, Jesus exhorts us, "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 about it. When you first became a Christian, what things did you do? You thought about the Lord! You thought about Him all the time. You delighted to communicate with Him. You talked to Him in prayer, and He talked to you through His Word. You got excited about worshipping Him.

So 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 worship a priority.

Men, we need to address a problem. A survey done by the devotional booklet, "The Upper Room," revealed that 85% of the subscribers are women. A June 1990 Gallup Poll conducted revealed that 71% of the women surveyed believed religion can answer today's problems, while only 55% of the men agreed. The typical church service has 59% females versus 41% male attenders (Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man, 17-8).

The church today needs men who will recapture their first love for Christ. A church that loses its love will soon lose its light (Wiersbe, 572).

B. What must the individual do? (7)

You may wonder, "Are you sure this letter applies to us?" Look at v 7, "He that hath an ear (do you have an ear?!), let him hear." What must we do as individuals?

1. *We must hear.*

This letter is for us. If we've left our first-love, we need to remember, repent, and repeat.

2. *We must heed.*

In v 7 Jesus gives this conditional promise, "To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." God calls us to be overcomers. We must not let the world sap us of our first love (nor lukewarm Christians). 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?

Sing: Songs of worship to Christ