

Introduction

If you have your Bible with you, I want to invite you to go ahead and head over to Revelation chapter 2 at this time... Revelation 2:1. As you're headed over there, a couple of quick things. If you're our guest, we are really glad that you are here today. I hope that you feel God's presence in this place. I hope that you feel encouraged, and that you believe... by the time it's done here... that God wants to use you to join in our mission to make Houston more like heaven by helping you become more like Jesus. If you're our guest today, we'd love it if you would let us know that you're here. You can do that in a couple of ways: There's a QR code on the back of the seat in front of you. You can just scan that with your phone. As you do that, it will take you straight to a digital Connection Card. Fill that out and submit it. We're not going to spam you; we just want to help you take the next step in your spiritual journey. If that's not the thing that you prefer to do... if you're more of an analog person... the cards look just like this in the seat pockets in front of you. You can fill one of these out and drop it into the boxes by the doors on your way out... whichever makes the most sense for you, but we really would ask you to do that today. I also want to let you know that we have a couple of Group Connect folks out in the Commons today after church. Look for the guys in the blue T-shirts. They will be out there helping to get you connected to a group. We think everyone needs to be part of a group or a Bible study. Then as I mentioned at the beginning of the service today, we have some special Sanctity of Life organizations that are with us today... New Life Adoptions, the Pasadena Pregnancy Center, and CareNet... with us today, so I hope that you will stop by and visit with them today. I am going to give a brief introduction to the Bible, I will pray, and then we'll jump into Revelation chapter 2.

The Bible is divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament gives us a record of God's chosen people called Israel, or the Hebrews, and tells us about their waiting for, their anticipating, of a Rescuer... a Redeemer. They use the word "Messiah"... this idea of a Chosen One who would be given by God to help rescue them. We find out in the second part of the Bible, the New Testament, who that Rescuer, that Redeemer, is. We discover that His name is Jesus. We find out that He is not just a teacher, He's not just a prophet but in fact He is God's Son... born of a virgin, lives a sinless human life, dies a death on a cross to pay the penalty for your sin and for mine, and then comes back from the dead three days later. Once He conquers the grave, the people who were following Him are absolutely convinced this was indeed God's Chosen One, so the Church began to explode as they began to tell everyone, "We found the Chosen One, and the way to live is the life that Jesus taught." Sometimes that way of life is known as the Kingdom of God, and so we teach that even here today, two thousand years later. Those of us who are in this room, we're the very real spiritual inheritors of the message of the Church from two thousand years ago. So today we'll teach the same things, that Kingdom of God, and we'll teach the Good News: the Gospel... that Jesus is indeed God's Son, that He paid the price for your sin on the cross, and that He conquered death by coming back from the dead. He wants you to place your faith in Him and to follow Him in faith every single day. One of Jesus' original disciples, one of the twelve, was a man named John. And John wrote a Book called "The Revelation"... the last Book of the Bible. We are studying through that Book, and it's here in chapter 2 today that we're going to jump in. Let's read here in Revelation chapter 2, starting in verse 1. I'll pray over us and then we'll jump in.

"God, today let us hear from You through Your Word... speak to us, challenge us, and God, my prayer is that You would move. As I speak, Lord, do miracles today... open hearts today... surprise us today... confront us today. Let us hear from You. God, we pray this and we ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen"

Revelation 2, starting in verse 1: *"Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus, ' thus says the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 'I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people. You have tested those*

who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars. I know that you have persevered and endured hardships for the sake of My name, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you: you have abandoned the love that you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. Yet you do have this: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." This is the Word of the Lord.

Many years ago, I was in the city of Hanoi, and as I was in Hanoi, I discovered that Hanoi had an abundance of name-brand goods that were sold at discount prices. It was just a trick to discover whether or not they were the real deal. I ended up in this watch shop, and they were selling Rolexes for fifty bucks. (Laughter) I was with someone on this trip who knew a little bit more about the finer things of life than I did, having never owned a Rolex. This person was willing to show me how I could spot that these weren't real. He said, "Steve, look... you hold this watch in your hand; do you feel how light this is? A real Rolex is going to be heavy. It's going to have a lot higher craftsmanship than this." He pointed out, "Look at the logo. Do you see the logo there? The Rolex logo is this little crown. You can see the detail on this; it's not very well done. This is clearly fake." I was grateful to have someone there who knew what an authentic Rolex was and what a fake one was. That way I wasn't wasting fifty bucks. The thing that's interesting to me about Revelation chapter 2 is that it is sort of the same thing. Jesus is giving a lesson on authenticity for churches. He is saying, "This is what a real church looks like; this is what a fake church looks like." Here today we are going to see what it is that Jesus is looking for when He is inspecting a church. If Jesus was to inspect Houston Northwest, what would He find? Would He find the things for which He is looking, or would He find something else? So, we are going to read today about the Church in Ephesus. The Church in Ephesus was a really influential and important church. Ephesus was known as "the light of Asia" because it was one of the wealthiest and most influential cities in all of Asia Minor... what we would call Turkey today. So there in the city were all kinds of interesting artifacts. There was incredible wealth; there were temples that were dedicated to various different emperors there in the city of Ephesus. They think at least three different temples to emperors were found in Ephesus. We also know that there were multiple different temples dedicated to multiple different gods. Diana had a temple there. There were other gods who also had temples that were there in the city of Ephesus. If you showed up in Ephesus, you would be surrounded by opulence and be surrounded by influence. It would be no mistake that the early Christian movement would want desperately to have a church located in the city of Ephesus... probably one of the, if not the most influential city in its day. You might remember that there was actually a big stir in Ephesus; whenever people were coming to faith and they weren't selling enough idols, it actually caused a riot that they went into the Coliseum there in the middle of town, and they said, "For ours, great is Artemis of the Ephesians." That's how important worshiping Artemis or Diana was in that city. So, of course, if there's a church there, which obviously there is, that would be a church that would be considered important because it's in the middle of this influential place. Certainly, this is a true Church. So Jesus comes to inspect it, and what does He find?

1. Jesus Wants A Working Church. (vv.2-3)

First, we see that Jesus wants and finds a working Church. When I say the word "working," I don't mean operational. I mean a church that's actually working, that's out in the community doing things. Look at what He says here in verses 2 and 3. First of all He says, "*I know your works, your labor.*" He is using words here... Jesus using words in Greek that it is clear that He sees that this is not a church that's just

hanging out. They are serving in the community. We don't get details of what they are doing, but we know from ancient history that early churches were probably serving the poor, feeding the hungry, helping the marginalized. That's probably the sorts of things that Jesus is talking about here. "You're doing the kind of things that are in line with the Kingdom," and Jesus is complimenting them. Then He goes on. He then says, "...your endurance." This is pretty important as well. The apostle Paul, in Galatians 6:9 says, "*Don't grow weary in doing good.*" Now remember, as we talked about last week, the Church is being persecuted in this moment. The emperor is killing Christians... they are throwing them to the lions... they are in the middle of the Coliseum and here, in this moment, they aren't giving up. They have great endurance. Right? Right now in the city of Houston, people are running a marathon. They are demonstrating endurance; they are starting and finishing a really long race. And in the same way, Jesus is saying, "Good job. Even though it's hard to show up every single day, you're not quitting. You're carrying on. You have deep spiritual endurance." So, He is commending them for that. Even further, He goes on... He says, "...I know that you cannot tolerate evil people. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars." Then He skips down a little bit later on, in verse 6, and He says, "...you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans." All of this together could be taken as doctrinal purity. There were some people who were claiming to be apostles, and they weren't, and the Church was confronting them on that. There were some evil people who were apparently trying to infiltrate the Church, and the Church wasn't having that. Then there was this group... the Nicolaitans... we really don't have enough historical evidence to know who they were. There are a lot of different theories out there, but we do know that they were trying to bring some evil practices into the Church... so evil that Jesus Himself says that He hates those practices, and the Church at Ephesus wasn't giving into those either. So what does that mean? They were working hard, they had big endurance, and they had doctrinal purity. Jesus shows up and He says, "This is good; you're working hard. Good thing." He also says, "You're basically putting your money where your mouth is. You said that you would do these things and you are doing it." Next, He then says, "You have great doctrine. You've held fast to the true Gospel, the true teaching of the Scripture."

Now, I want you to think about this. It feels good to get a compliment, right? Someone comes up to you and they say, "You look nice today." You're like, "Well... thank you very much." It feels good. And people say, "You did a good job on whatever." That feels nice whenever someone says that. Now imagine that Jesus is complimenting you. If Jesus walked in this room and came up to the front and took the mic and He said, "Houston Northwest, I've been watching you. Here's some things you're doing great. Working hard, you've got endurance... your doctrine is impeccable." What would we do? Probably start sticking our chest out a little bit... "Glad You kinda noticed what we're doing down here, Jesus. We appreciate it." The compliment coming straight from the mouth of Jesus about His Church seems pretty incredible. And then He says "but..." I always hate that don't you? You're hoping it's the compliment sandwich, but it's really not even a compliment sandwich. He just turns it. He says, "You're doing some great things, but there's a problem." Jesus says He wants a church that's working, that's serving, that's doing the things in the community, but... look at verse 4.

2. But Foremost A Loving Church. (v. 4)

"But I have this against you..." He says, "...you have abandoned the love you had at first." Jesus wants a church that's working, but more than that, Jesus wants, foremost, a loving church. I want to be clear. The theology of the Ephesian church: impeccable. The action and the service of the Ephesian church: commendable. They brought in good, they kept out the bad, and yet Jesus says, "*You have abandoned the love you had at first.*" Some translations say, "*You've forsaken your first love.*" Who's the first love of the Ephesian church? Jesus. I want you to think about this. Jesus says, "You're doing all the things I've asked

you to do, but you don't really love Me." I don't know about you, but that scares me. It scares me because what this passage seems to say is that, as an individual, and perhaps more frightening, as a church... we can do the things of God without loving God. The Ephesian church... they are feeding the hungry, they're clothing the naked, they are visiting the folks in prison, they are lifting up the oppressed, and Jesus says, "That's great but you're doing all of it without loving Me." Can you imagine that being said of our church? "Man... Houston Northwest... love that ESL program that you have. That's fantastic. Love the fact that you guys do Kingdom Saturday, go out and serve love... the fact that you're serving the refugees in the community... but I wished that you loved Me more." Jesus loves a church which does His work but wants a church that first will worship Him. He wants us to love Him. The crazy thing is that we can work for Jesus without loving Him.

Now, first love... in my opinion, has two qualities. These aren't from the Scriptures, but this is what, in my mind, first love means: It means passion and position. When I first fell in love with Joy. Man... I did not require sleep. It was amazing. I would get up early; I would stay up late. I would do things that I had no idea how to do. "Yes... I will cook." I didn't even hardly own silverware at the time. I did whatever I had to do. I would write letters. I would do all of these things because I wanted to give my attention to her... to let her know that I loved her. She was my first love. I've got to admit... sleep is a little more important to me now. (Laughter) Now, I love my wife... but sleep is a little more important. What happens? Somehow over time, passion can cool... and somehow the passion that people had for Jesus and the Church at Ephesus had cooled off. What about you? Was there ever a time in your life that you can remember, maybe you were at a camp or on a mission trip... or maybe when you first came to faith in Christ... or maybe you were in a church service and you would leave here and you would think, "I'm going to go home, and I'm going to read the Bible. I just want to spend as much time as I can studying the Scriptures. I want to spend as much time as I can praying or singing these songs... just giving glory to Jesus." You can remember those passionate days when you had love for Jesus above anything else. That's first love. I think another thing that first love is characterized by is position. I have multiple people in my house. So, I have Joy, have Ben, have Andrew, and I have a couple of dogs... I have some dachshunds. Now, I want to let you know that I love my dachshunds, but if I loved them more than I love my wife, there could be some problems at home, right? (Laughter) When company comes over, it's a very common practice for us to put the dogs on the back porch and to lock the door. Can you imagine if I said, "Joy, it's time for you to go sit on the back patio now." (Laughter) "I'm just going to lock the door... but the dogs can stay in during this time." Immediately, people would say, "Your priorities are out of whack." That would not work because that's not the way that love is supposed to operate. You say, "Well... absolutely." Many of us can remember a time when Jesus was the most important thing in our life, and if we're honest now, He is number eight on our list. We get up in the morning and the first thing we do is we check social media, read the news... we're not jumping straight into the pages of Scripture. We're getting up and we're checking email... "What do I need to do to make sure that things are ready to go at work?" We're not spending time to really focus on our love for the Lord. We go throughout our day, and we don't even think about the Lord as we go about our day because we're focused in on other things. For many of us, both passion and position have slipped. Now, I want to be clear. I think that mature love may change in its expression of passion, right? I couldn't live on 2-1/2 hours' sleep all of my life. That would have killed me. But even as I grew, my position... the love that I have for Joy... remained in its first position because if it shifts, then we have a problem. But even still, there are still moments when I make an exuberant or demonstrative show of my passion for her, because she is still my first love. In the same way with Jesus, my passion may not look the same that it used to look, but His position stays at the top... so still, when I come out here on Sunday mornings, I'll still raise up my hands. If I go to a conference or something, I may even be reminded of that and make a passionate, demonstrative expression of my love for Jesus. Some of us, for whatever reason, our love has

cooled down, and because of that, we can't remember the last time that we made a show of loving the Lord. When we first came to faith in Christ, we carried our Bible places. We'd read it, we'd give generously, even sacrificially... we'd serve. "Man, they need help at church. I'll be there. You bet I'll be there because... think about what Jesus has done for me." And then since then, we're like, "I'm sure somebody else can do it." We used to be at church every single week. Now it's like, "You know, I'll get there if I can." The position has slipped so our passion never gets to come out. This is important because, as Jesus says... now listen... Jesus says, "A church must love Him." Over the years, churches can be distracted by all kinds of things. "Am I a cool church? Am I a big church? How many numbers do we have? What kind of programs do we have?" But what Jesus says is, "Look, I'm glad that you're doing all that stuff, but I want you to love Me first." If we do the things for God and we don't love God, are we a church? Jesus says, "No." He says, "I want you to love Me... love Me first." Now how do we do that? Here's the crazy thing. You might be sitting there thinking, "Well, Steve... you're the pastor... make us love more." I can't do that can I? I can't make you love Jesus more. And the truth of the matter is that it's not a church who loves Jesus... it's each of you loving Jesus collectively. Our church becomes a church that pleases Jesus more, the more that each of us decide to love Him... each of us must decide to love Him. If we are serving in the community but we are not loving Jesus, then we are failing our inspection.

3. Because Only Love Brings Life. (v. 7)

Why is that? Because only love brings life. Look at verse 7: Jesus says, *"To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."* God wants us to have life. He wants every person in this room to have life. God became flesh in the person of Jesus, died on the cross, conquered the grave, did all that because He wants you to have life. That is what He did; He did that. But the only way you get that is through love. Many people believe that the way that you get access to the love of God is by doing more stuff, right? Now this is important... Jesus says, *"To the one who conquers, then I will give the ability to eat of the tree of life..."*

Now, the Greek word for "conquer" comes from the same Greek word for the word that we would get "Nike," which is the Greek goddess of victory. When you go up the steps... you come into the port of Ephesus, you go up the steps, you'll be greeted by a statue of the goddess Nike. Jesus isn't choosing that word accidentally. He says, "If you want to have true victory... true conquering... then you're going to love first." You see, anybody who has been in athletics knows this: athletics is all about discipline and training. You get up early, you show up at practice, you eat right, you do those things... you discipline yourself and then you'll have a certain output. And many people believe, when it comes to church, "If I just do these certain outputs, then I'll make God happy." To be clear, spiritual disciplines are good. Church attendance is good. Generosity is good... but none of those things will make God love you. The only way you get to eat from the tree of life... true victory, true conquering... Jesus says it: "You've got to love Me." If you want to have life, you've got to love. The way that you get life with God is that you love Jesus Christ. You know that Jesus Christ is God in flesh. You believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sin. You know that He was raised from the grave, and He wants to fill you with His Spirit. Only then, when you love Him, can you have life. And Jesus says, "If you won't do this..." look at verse 5... this is crazy to me. Verse 5: "If you won't love Me, I'll take away your lampstand." Now if you remember from last week, chapter 1, the lampstand represents the Church. Jesus says, "If you won't love Me, I'll shut this thing down." Now you may be thinking, "Well, okay... churches close all the time. What's the big deal?" I'll tell you... the Church at Ephesus was kind of a "who's who" kind of church... founded by the Apostle Paul with the help of Priscilla and Aquilla (you've heard of them). Paul leaves and appoints a new pastor... oh, by the way, they disciplined Apollos there in Ephesus. Then Paul leaves and appoints a new pastor; his name is Timothy. You

may have heard of him. Timothy dies and when Timothy leaves, the new pastor is John, the man who wrote the Revelation. And we know from the Gospel of John, that on the cross, Jesus gave the care of His mother to John. So if she lived long enough, Mary the mother of Jesus worshiped in this church as well. Paul, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, Timothy, John, and Mary... and Jesus says, "I will shut down my momma's church if you don't love Me." I want you to think about that. Jesus says, "I don't give a rip about the legacy of your church. I want to know about the love of your church." You hear it, right? People say, "Well, I go to so and so's church," and they drop the name of their pastor in there. Guys, if you love me more than you love Jesus, I've messed up. I'm grateful that you're kind to me, that you love me, but when you walk out of here, you shouldn't be saying, "Man... that Steve Bezner." I hope that you're saying, "Man... that Jesus." Because the legacy of Houston Northwest will end if the love of Houston Northwest for Jesus Christ does not carry on... because Jesus will show up, and He will take the lampstand away. He will shut down the Church.

Years ago I was in London on a Sunday morning. I was in my twenties, and I had the opportunity to go worship... if I remember correctly, it was Palm Sunday, but I could be wrong... at St. Paul's cathedral in London. I was excited to go to worship at this stately church. I showed up at one of the most large, opulent buildings in London on a Sunday morning, and there may have been fifty people there for worship. Beautiful, beautiful structure but very few people in the room. Why? I don't know, but certainly there had been a time when that room had been filled with people who loved Jesus and it no longer was. I want our church to be a church filled not just with people but with people who love Jesus Christ.

So how do we get that? Verse 5 tells us... if there was a time when you loved Jesus and you are just honest, "You know, I really don't; I need to restore that." We read it in verse 5. He says, "First, remember... remember how far you've fallen," is what John says. He says, "Remember. There was a time when you used to sing praise music in the car; you don't do it anymore. There was a time when worship was your top priority; it's not there anymore. There was a time when you read the Word of God, and you cried out to Me in prayer; those things don't happen anymore. Remember those things." He says, "Remember how far you have fallen," and then he says, "Repent. Go back to doing the things you did at first," is what He says. Return back to those things. Now it's interesting because many of us can think, "Well, I've grown past that; I've matured past that." And maybe we've matured past some of those things. Right? There are certain things that maybe we can grow up in the faith. "I used to think this; I don't think that anymore." Sure... but we should never stop loving Jesus. If we ever stop loving Jesus, we have not matured; we have molded. We are to grow in our faith and in our love. As we remember our forgiveness, our life, our hope, our purpose, our blessing, our calling... as we remember those things, we repent and we will turn back to do the things that God has called us to do. Just being totally honest... totally honest. There have been times in my life... even when I was a pastor, when I started to get bitter toward the Church... and bitter toward God. Do you know why? ...Because my love for God was waning. When your love for God wanes, you start to keep track of everything you're doing for God.

I've been married now for 22 years... going on 23... and the vast majority of it has been awesome... but there have been some moments that have been less than awesome. And there have been times when I'm almost secretly keeping a tally... "I'm doing this stuff, and Joy's not doing that." That worked out really well, by the way. (Laughter) I'm keeping track of those things, right? "I'm doing these things, and she's not doing those things," and as I would do that, do you know what would happen? I'd get bitter in my heart toward her. Some of us, as our love wanes for God... "I taught in that class for 32 years..."; "I was super generous..."; or "I did those things"; or "I used to attend all the time..." And what we do is we start to build our case as to why... we've already loved God enough, and we don't need to do that anymore. Here's the

thing. The reason we feel that way is because somewhere along the way, we stopped doing those things out of love, and we started those things out of obligation. You know... Did you know that it's possible to do all of the chores that your wife asks you to do and to be mad the whole time? (Laughter) You can do that. [angrily] "Wash these dishes..." (Laughter) You can do that, but did you love her while you were doing that? You can show up at church, and you can be hacked the entire time. You can show up and serve in the kids' ministry and be angry. You can go out on Kingdom Saturday, and you can look like someone who drank pickle juice for breakfast. You can do all of those things. We have been called to love. Some of us in this room, we're sitting here thinking, "I just want to return back to that love." And I would just commend to you verse 5, "Remember and repent." Remember how far you have fallen and go back to doing the things you used to do. Others of us... we've never loved Jesus. Hearing it today, you're thinking, "I want that. I want to know hope and life and purpose and forgiveness. I want to know what it is that God has for me." And I want you to know it too. So today, I would say to you, "Stop loving yourself first, and start loving Him"... because if you want the approval of Jesus, the first thing you have to do is to love Him. Jesus gives His approval freely, but He wants you to love Him. He wants you to love the forgiveness He gives, the purpose He brings, the joy, the righteousness, the holiness. He wants you to experience these things on a deep and real level, but you can't until you decide to put Him in first place and to love Him over everything else. I love my wife, but I love Jesus more. And that's what He wants from you. He wants you to love Him more than your kids, more than your spouse, more than your boyfriend or girlfriend, more than your job, more than your grades, more than any achievement that you might ever have. The only way that the rest of your life gets put in order is if you love Jesus first and foremost.

And so today, here's our question: As Jesus inspects your heart, what does He see? Does He see your love for Him, or does He find that you love something else? He is looking for authentic churches; what does He find when He looks at us? Probably the only people that know the answer to that are you and Him. Would you pray with me?

"Father, we thank You... we thank You that You have put in our hearts a desire to put You at the top... to love You above all else. Lord, today I pray this, and I ask this... that You would indeed have us love You. God, for those of us who... there was a time when we loved You more than anything else, but we've cooled on that. God, I pray that You would stir in our hearts today... that You would stoke the coals until a flame burns brightly. Let us be on fire for You, Jesus. God, for those who, for whatever reason, have not chosen to do so today, God, call them to You."

Nobody looking around. I'm just going to give you an opportunity, if that's you... if you say, "Today, I'm ready to say 'Yes' to Jesus. It's time for me to put Him in first place in my life." I just want to pray for you. Would you just look at me... just make eye contact with me and say, "Steve, today is the day; I'm ready to follow Jesus." Just look at me if that's you. Okay... okay. Anybody else? Okay, I see you; thank you. Anybody else? Okay. If you just looked at me, I'm just going to pray for you right now.

"Lord, I want to lift up these who just made eye contact with me and one who raised his hand... God I want to pray that they would say today that they're ready to prioritize You at the highest. Lord, I pray today that they would know the grace and the freedom that comes from knowing You, and Lord that today... that right now... they would just follow You." If that was you, would you just pray with me in this? "Jesus, I love you. Thank You for saving me; thank You for loving me. I give my heart to You. Lord, I love You and I'll follow You all of my days. In the name of Your Son, amen."

If you made a decision just now for the Lord, here's what I want to ask you to do. There's going to be a number up on the screen. Would you just take out your phone and just text the word "Jesus" to that

number? We're not looking to spam you, but we've got folks that will be on the other end of that, and what they are going to do is they are going to help you take your next step spiritually. They are going to say, "Hey, here's a Bible reading plan." Or "Here are the next steps to get baptized." Or whatever you might need. If you're in this room and you've not been baptized, but you want to be baptized... we're going to have a baptism here in a second. Then you can say, "Hey, I need to be baptized." Text that in to the number. You may have other things. "I'm new" or "I have questions" or whatever. Live people are ready to listen, so please do so.