

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 96 | Revelation 2:1-7: Remembering Our First Love

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Hunter Beaumont



Autumn: Welcome to the Vision for Life Podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the church at large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, host of the Vision for Life Podcast, and Hunter is joining me today. Hunter, so glad to have you here.

Hunter: Autumn, I'm so glad to be here.

Autumn: Today we are- oh, nothing else? That's it, you're just glad to be here?

Hunter: Nothing sassy today.

Autumn: Okay.

Hunter: I'm so glad to be here, I'm not going to sass you.

Autumn: Great. You're hoping to be invited back?

Hunter: I'm hoping to be invited back, yeah.

Autumn: That's usually a comment you would make, so I just made it for you.

Hunter: Thank you. Yes.

Autumn: Today we are looking at a specific passage of Scripture together, and the content for today's podcast discussion is based on teaching that you did at a conference hosted at a neighboring church down the road. Our friends over at Calvary Church in Englewood hosted a conference and invited you to teach. So, I'll let you fill us in on what we're going to discuss today based on this topic that you had recently studied.

Hunter: Well, a few weeks ago, I had to spend some time with a group of about 300 pastors and church leaders. So, typically staff teams, elders, some volunteers who are really involved in revitalizing older churches. That's what most of them are doing. So, some of the pastors there are the fifth, sixth, seventh pastor in the history of the church, and they're taking over a church that is in decline, and they're just bringing gospel renewal into the life of the church. And some of the volunteers that were there have been longtime church members, and they're hoping to see their churches revitalized with kind of fresh energy and fresh life. That was kind of the theme of this conference, and it was so refreshing to be with them. And I was asked to talk about mission to the city, and as I kind of prayed on what to talk about and talk with the leaders of the conference, God really led me to a passage in Revelation chapter 2 that we'll talk through here in a minute. And as you and I were kind of talking about what would be some good things to discuss on this podcast, I really thought the message that I got to discuss with that conference would be really relevant for Fellowship Denver as well, for our church as well, especially in the times that we are living in culturally and in the life of the capital "C" Church. And so, that's what we're going to talk about today.

Autumn: What was it particularly about this Revelation 2 passage that drew you in as far as talking about mission in the city and loving our city?

Hunter: The main thing that drew me to it was this passage, Revelation 2, is written to a church that's living in a time where there's pressure from two directions. There's pressure from outside, we might say there's pressure from, "the

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culture," there's pressure from the world on them, but there's also pressure from inside the broader church environment in which they live. So, there's both pressures coming on them, and because of these pressures, there's an aspect of vital Christianity that they are tempted to not live up and in to. And so, in the particular passage we're going to look at, there are seven letters to seven different churches that are all in this region called Asia Minor. And each of these churches is maybe navigating this tension a little different way, and Jesus speaks to them in that particular condition. And the one we're going to look at, which is for the church in Ephesus, He commends them for something, and I think it's important to see what He commends them for. And then He also corrects them for some aspect of vital discipleship that they've kind of lost. And they've lost it because of the pressure that they are living under. And I think churches, including ours, who are faithful to the gospel, are actually tempted to lose this aspect of vital Christianity. So, that was the message I shared at the conference. It generates a lot of good conversation. I had a lot of follow up discussion about it, such to the point that I thought this is a really timely message that the Lord has for us as a church. And so, that's why I want to talk about it with you.

Autumn: And this passage, did you say it's Revelation 2?

Hunter: Revelation 2:1-7. It is the beginning of the Book of Revelation. And in the beginning Jesus is giving, through John the author, He is speaking to seven different churches in a region called Asia, which is not quite the same as what we think of Asia today, but more of the modern-day Turkey. And this was a center of vital Christianity in the first and second centuries. And Jesus is speaking to seven churches in several different cities, and He is speaking into their life in light of these pressures that they are living under. And many who study Revelation would say these seven churches are kind of typical of the church universal at all times in history until Jesus returns. And so, there has been a long tradition of reading these seven letters to the seven churches of Revelation as speaking to the condition of the church well beyond when Revelation was written.

Autumn: What was some of the cultural context or maybe this sort of external pressure that the church in Ephesus was facing when it was written?

Hunter: There are two schools of thought on when Revelation was written. One school of thought is it was written probably in the mid-sixties AD, when the Church was living under Emperor Nero, and Emperor Nero carried on a pretty vast persecution of Christians. So, that's one school of thought. The other school of thought is it was written more like 90 AD, the latest book in the New Testament, and it's written under an emperor named Domitian. And Domitian was known for establishing a cult of emperor worship. And there was especially pressure on churches in this part of the world under Emperor Domitian to cave into that emperor worship. I tend to think that Revelation is written later, so I think the 90 date is probably the more likely scenario. John—we know John, who was the original John who followed Jesus as a young man, right—John is now an old man, and he had been part of these churches and he's been exiled as part of this persecution to an island called Patmos. He's writing this as an old man. And that would also lend itself to the 90 date because it's very likely John lived into the 90s. I think it's a later date. It doesn't necessarily matter when you date it. The point is, the church is facing pressure and it's, to your question, it's coming from two directions. There is pressure externally to worship the emperor, and there was a cult that developed a cult of the Roman emperor being worshiped as a god. And Christians are being accused of being bad for society, you might say, or they are upsetting the social order because they will not go along with this emperor worship. And the reason they won't go along with it is not that they don't respect the emperor, because there's plenty of New Testament teaching about respect government authorities, right? It's not that they don't respect the emperor, but they don't believe the emperor is to be deified. And they certainly

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don't believe the emperor is their highest authority. They believe Jesus is Lord. And because they believe Jesus Lord, there are things that the emperor asked them to do that they have to filter through: can we do that and be consistent with the lordship of Jesus? And not everything the emperor is asking they can do, including worship him as God. And so, they're not going along with this cult of emperor worship. And because they're not, they are being accused of being socially seditious, we might say, or going against the social order. It would not be that different from if the vast majority of the ruling class in our world today says, 'You need to go along with the sexual revolution,' for example, or certain understandings of identity and sexuality that have become very prevalent. And if Christians say, well, we can't in good conscience go along with that, that's fine if you want to do that, but we're not going to go along with that, and then they are accused, therefore, of being against the good of society. That's a real example in today's world, right? Well, in the same way that's what was happening to Christians in this particular part of the world at that time in history. So that's the external pressure. The internal pressure is probably a Judaizing pressure, and Judaizing, which was to bring Christians back under obedience to the Jewish law, had been a long problem that the early churches had to face. You see this well before 90, if Revelations written in- the 90s, you see this going back into the 50s and 60s, Paul dealt with this. Paul's dead by the time Revelation is written, but Paul dealt with this in his ministry. You see it predominantly letter to the Galatians. You get lots of hints at it in 1st and 2nd Corinthians as well, and other Pauline letters. And this continues to be an issue and it has a special appeal with this pressure for emperor worship in this sense: Judaism was a protected religion in the Roman Empire. Meaning, if you practice Judaism, you could say, we're not going to go along with the emperor cult. And they would be like, well, that's okay, we know you don't do that because you're Jewish, and we've agreed that we're going to let you do that; we're going to let you practice your own religion. So, it was protected. And so, the temptation is, if Christians would just come back under the umbrella of Judaism, if you would just come back under the protection of Judaism and keep the Roman law, or, sorry, keep the Jewish law, then you could claim Judaism as your religion, not Christianity as your religion, and therefore you could be protected from the emperor, right? And the pressure there is that's already been established now pretty well, especially through Paul's teaching, that compromises the gospel. It compromises the clarity of justification by faith, not works. It compromises the gospel. And so, they can't do that either. But there's a real temptation to do that.

There's probably also just a temptation from some, and we get a hint of this group, we don't know exactly who they are, but they're called the Nicolaitans, and Jesus says He hates the teaching of the Nicolaitans. It's probably a group that said it's actually not compromised just to go along with the emperor worship. Like, if you could just go along with the emperor worship and do that and still worship Jesus too, you'd be okay, right? And emperor worship also had a sexual kind of cultic practices attached to it, which were probably pleasurable, fun. So, you get to do that too, right?

Autumns: Seems like a win-win.

Hunter: Seems like a win-win. And throughout the Book of Revelation, you see churches warn not to give into the sexual immorality that has become prevalent at the time and that was probably connected to emperor worship anyway. So, this is the pressure from inside the church to compromise either by coming under the umbrella of Judaism or just going along with emperor worship. So, if you think about this, the external pressure is from the emperor. We're going to persecute you if you don't come along. The internal pressure is from people in the church going, you know, we really can go along, and that's fine, and we can do all the things, or it's the internal pressure of saying, maybe we should just come back under the umbrella of Judaism, all of which compromises the gospel. So, pressure both ways. That's what these churches are facing.

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Autumn: In establishing this context into which this passage in Revelation was written to the church at Ephesus at the time, what about Ephesus is helpful for us to know? That it was an urban center; you mentioned where it was located already—what about this helps us establish the context of this passage as well?

Hunter: Ephesus was one of the major churches in the early wave of the Jesus movement. It was probably established in around 52 AD. It was established when Paul initially made a foray into the city of Ephesus. If he did what he would normally do, he would go to the Jewish synagogue first, he would reason that Jesus is the Messiah, then he would go to Gentiles. He preaches the gospel, he moves on. He comes back at some time later and he finds that there's an embryonic Christian community there, people who believed in Jesus. You can read about this in Acts 18 and 19, and then, this is critical, he spends two years there. He spends two years developing these young Christians that the gospel continues to spread, more people come to faith. The church that gets established in Ephesus, which was kind of a major city for its region, it becomes a mission center to the rest of that region of Asia. So, when we're reading Revelation and we're reading the letters to the seven churches, Ephesus is likely the major, the big church, in that whole area and the one that had kind of been the mother church that helped all these others get going. And so, it becomes a two-year mission center for Paul where he's doing ministry to the surrounding area. He's training and developing the disciples in Ephesus. The church is growing. He has a long season of fruitful ministry there. And that kind of golden era comes to a close with a riot. The silversmiths in the city, they had a great temple to a goddess named Artemis. The silversmiths become nervous that the growth of the Jesus movement is disrupting their trade. That's how significant it has been. So, there's a riot, and at the end of that riot, Paul leaves the city because it's become too dangerous to stay, really. And so, that's kind of the end of the first golden era of the church in Ephesus. So, if it's established in 52, then it is about 40 years old by the time Revelation is written. That means it's on its second or third, maybe fourth generation of leaders. It's not the original leaders who were there in the golden era, but it's also young enough as a church they still remember all the stories of all the cool things God did when the church got going, but we've got new leaders. They're living in a different era, it's a different environment. And so, that's the church that John is writing to, Jesus is speaking to.

Autumn: The church in many places, in Ephesus included, had been a disruptive presence. You mentioned that they experienced this kind of economic pressure as well, or pressure from some of the economic leaders in the city. That's what caused Paul to leave when there was this riot. They were experiencing pressure in terms of religious practice to worship the emperor and to participate in the broader kind of practices attached to that in culture. They were experiencing or tempted towards perhaps some compromise internally in order to make their situation more comfortable or palatable or allow them to exist without some of those to alleviate some of those pressures they were experiencing. So, this is the situation in which the church in Ephesus exists. Now let's read the passage. What does Revelation 2 say to this church that was existing in this context?

Hunter: Yeah, let's read it. And we've been building up to this. There's something Jesus puts his finger on that they've kind of let go of, and they might have even let go of it unconsciously as they've been dealing with this pressure. And so, what I'm kind of wanting us to get to is this is the thing that we need to keep in mind, this thing that Jesus kind of calls them back to, calls to their attention. Okay, so here it is, Revelation 2:1-7, He says to the angel of the church in Ephesus, right? And a quick note here: the word "angel" literally just means messenger. And some Revelation commentators believe that that was a stand-in title for the pastor of the church being Jesus's messenger. Now, it could have been referring to a heavenly angel who sends Jesus's message, because He would have sent His message that way. That could be what it means. But some think it's just saying, hey, send this message to the pastor of the church in Ephesus, write this: 'The words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.' The

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seven golden lampstands are symbolic of these seven churches. and they're called lampstands for the same reason that Jesus used the image of a lamp on a stand back in his Sermon on the Mount, where He's like, 'No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but they put it on a stand so it can give light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who's in heaven.' The point of a lampstand is your purpose is a witness and is a light. So, He's reminding these churches that their identity, their vocation, their calling, is as a witness and as a light to the world. So, to Him who walks among the seven golden lampstands—Me, I'm present among you, I'm present in your life, I'm speaking as one who is spiritually with you, I'm not watching you from a distance, I'm in your midst, and I'm going to give you something that I've seen as I'm with you—He says this, 'I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and have found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for My name's sake, and you have not grown weary.' He's commending them here for their faithfulness to the teaching of the gospel. That's what He means by, 'Those who call themselves apostles who are not,' meaning those who would represent Christianity who are teaching a false version of Christianity. Later on, He'll say this in verse six, 'You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.' This is those who were teaching that they could compromise—it's the internal pressure from the church—teaching that they could compromise. So, what Jesus commends them for here is what we might call their theological integrity, their Biblical fidelity, their commitment to the original message of Christianity, their commitment to the gospel. They've been very vigilant to protect against false teaching. They've not let false teaching infiltrate their church. And we actually know from the New Testament, because Paul wrote two letters to Timothy—1st and 2nd Timothy—at a time when Timothy was the pastor of this church. We know they had faced temptation to give into false teaching before, and he's asking Timothy to guard and protect the flock from that. They've successfully overcome those trials. And this is a church that is now known for its commitment to the Bible and for its resistance of false teaching, which Jesus commends them for, okay? Alright. He says in verse four, 'But I have this against you, that you've abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore, from where you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. And then He turns and commends them again. He goes, yeah, this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Now, the thing that I find fascinating is this correction that Jesus gives them. And here's how it sounds: you've abandoned the love you had at first, and then therefore remember the work you did at first. And the love they had at first was the love they had for Jesus and for the gospel, which resulted in them doing the work of mission and evangelism for their whole part of the world, for their city and their whole part of the world. So, the idea here is that the picture is that this church has been vigilant to protect against false teaching, they've been vigilant to protect against letting this pressure from inside and outside compromised them, and Jesus commends them for that. But, in the course of fighting off that pressure, they have lost the love they had for the gospel, just the genuine wonder they had that we are sinners who God has saved by His grace, by giving His only Son, and we have this hope in the kingdom that is to come, and we have this new life in the Spirit. They've lost the genuine joy they have in that, and then they've quit doing the work of mission and evangelism that they did at first. It flowed out of that joy. And Jesus says to them, 'You need to repent of that,' which is strong language. And then He adds this, 'If you don't repent, I'm going to come and remove your lampstand,' meaning, I'm going to come and remove your witness as a church—you're not going to exist forever as a church. So, it's really poignant and fascinating. What Jesus sees as a faithful church is not just one who is faithful to preserve the gospel and resist false teaching, it's also a church that's faithful to continue to keep its love vibrant and to do the work of mission and evangelism that they did at first.

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Autumn: You said at the top of our discussion, Hunter, that there's a longstanding tradition of seeing these passages, the different letters to the seven churches, as a sort of typological message that churches today can learn from and adhere to and be corrected by in the same way that these corrections were being issued to very real churches in real cities like this church in Ephesus. And so, let's assume that that's how we're going to look at this passage now and ask, if we were to imagine these pressures that were placed on the church in Ephesus, based on what we can know about the time and place in which they existed, what are similarly some of the pressures that the church here—maybe these church leaders who you were speaking to at this conference, and now as we think about our own church family here fellowship—what are some of these pressures that we currently face, whether external or internal, but particularly because of the culture in which we exist?

Hunter: Yeah, I alluded to it earlier. I think that the revolution in the Western world about how we form identity, which is a very individualistic form of identity that rejects any external authority or any tradition, and that would include rejecting the authority of God, the authority of the Bible, the tradition of Christianity. This way of forming identity combined with the sexual revolution, which is to basically say all forms and practices of sexuality are permissible, I think that is the biggest pressure that the Church today faces, both externally and internally. And I say externally because our world, even in the 17 years I've been in ministry, our world has become far more advanced down that path, and there are more and more voices from within the church that are essentially rationalizing and justifying why the church can go along with that. And, as that's happened, I think the church can't go along without compromising a lot of things that are critical to how we understand and imagine what it means to be a Christian and what the gospel itself is. And so, as a simple factual statement, I would say when a church compromises on identity and sexuality, it is now teaching a message that is not Christianity. And I mean that in just the fact. I don't mean that that's not Christianity like a smear, insulting sense. I mean it in a statement of facts; it is factually different than the faith that has once and for all been delivered to the saints that came from Jesus to the apostles through the New Testament and has been taught across cultures and 2000 years of history. Now, it's factually different, so, if we compromise on those points, what we have to come to terms with is we've effectively invented a new religion and maybe it's better than the old religion, maybe it's right, maybe it's correct. But we need to be honest that it's not the same thing. So, I think that's the pressure the Church faces. There is probably another pressure as the Church, especially the Evangelical Church in America, has become so wedded to politics. That the way of doing politics, which requires us to live and act and interact with people in a way that violates a lot of New Testament ethics about love and truthfulness, doing politics in that way also distorts the faith to the point that it becomes something less than Christianity, right? So, I think those are the pressures that we're dealing with, and that pressure comes from the world that is asking us to go along with their agenda in this way and then that pressure comes from within the church, from those who would say we can do that, right? So, in that sense I think we face this internal and external pressure.

Now, what I'm noticing is this: there are a lot of churches, and I put Fellowship Denver in this category, I would put the churches that I was speaking to at this conference you referenced in this category, they've done a really good job of resisting the pressure to compromise the gospel. The Church as a whole, speaking for the Church—individuals in the church may face that pressure in different ways and some of them may be tempted toward compromising the gospel for sure—but as an institution, the Church and its leaders have done a great job of holding fast to the truth, resisting the pressure both externally and internally to compromise the message of the gospel. And I think, for those of us who have done a good job of holding fast to biblical authority, that we need to hear this message that that's not all faithfulness is; faithfulness is not just holding fast to biblical authority in a pressure time, faithfulness is also continuing to be faithful to the work of being a witness to Christ, which flows out of genuine love for the gospel. So, we need to keep our love fresh,

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and we need to keep our witness and our mission fresh. And I can feel the pressure to kind of not focus as much on those things in a season when I feel like I have to do so much work just to make sure I'm being clear about what the faith, the Christian faith, is, and protecting people from false teaching and all of that. And I think that's a common temptation that churches like ours face, and we will call ourselves faithful because we're being faithful to the gospel, but we might subtly be letting the zeal for Christ and His mission slip.

Autumn: Yeah, we sense this pressure from culture, or can readily identify it, and certainly have this temptation to withdraw or to build walls or to become inwardly focused. Or maybe it's a temptation towards just avoiding the stress of those interactions and wanting not to dwell in spaces in which it feels like the conflict or combativeness is too much, and so we withdraw rather than remain present in those sorts of situation, scenarios, or areas in which the environment tends that direction. But I think you're saying that we should hear a strong caution in this against that response or reaction. Probably more of a reaction than a thoughtful response. I think there are a couple of ways that this sort of withdrawal can look, or perhaps this protective reaction can look. One of those might be more defensive, and one of those might be more passive.

Hunter: Yeah, it could look like combative. Like we are going to put a lot of energy into combating the pressures on the church, and we're going to put so much energy into combating those pressures, and that looks like, man, we're going to have a sermon series on this, and we're going to have podcast, and we're going to write books, and we're going to debate articles, and it's all about resisting the pressure of the secular culture. So, there can be that.

Autumn: And that temptation maybe more easily bound up in the sort of political persuasions that you mentioned earlier, wedded together with certain political ideologies or agendas.

Hunter: It can feel very energetic, like we're doing something; we're pushing back darkness; we're gathering our energy. Okay, so that's one temptation. But as we're gathering that energy, we're not putting the same amount of energy into mission and evangelism. Right, that's the critique. But another one I think is more subtle but equally powerful, and that is more of like, we're just going to lay low and we're going to live our Christian life. We're going to be faithful. We're going to raise our kids as faithfully as we can. We're going to worry about where our kids are going to go to school. We're going to kind of protect them, and we're going to be faithful Christians, and we're just going to kind of keep our heads down and try not to take too many bullets from either direction. And we'll say we're just going to be a quiet, faithful presence for Jesus, and we're just going to be here and be faithful. I think many are more drawn to that. I probably am personally, temperamentally, more drawn to that. I would guess a lot of our churches are more drawn to that. And so, the challenge for us is, no, you've got to do the work you did at first, which is going to require you to be public about the beauty and the glory of Christ. It also needs to flow out of a genuine love for Christ and the gospel, and that necessarily creates the potential for conflict or for resistance from the world. They're going to have questions, they're going to push back. And they're not going to be pushing back just because you are arguing against their understandings of identity and all that. Although you may have to do some of that work in order to help people understand the gospel, but they are going to sense that the gospel itself is a threat to this whole system that they've embraced. It's not a quiet life; it's not an easy life. Maybe the best way to say we're going to try to live peacefully with all people, of course, but it could invite resistance that, if we're honest, it makes us nervous.

Autumn: I would say my temptation would definitely be towards the second, to not create waves, to do my best to get along with as many people as possible. But interestingly, I think even though they look very different, both of these

responses can be self-focused, ultimately. And the call to the gospel and to this love that Jesus is reminding the church of Ephesus that doesn't allow for a response or a way of life that is ultimately self-focused or self-fulfilling. So, if we continue to ask how this letter to the church at Ephesus also can speak to us and that we can turn to and interpret in some ways technologically for us as a church in a modern context but facing some pressures that are actually similar from culture, if this caution is so clear to the Ephesians not to abandon their first love or the first works, we've asked, what are the parallels in culture, now what is the parallel in that caution and in that message to us?

Hunter: I think Jesus has actually given us a picture here that the works flow out of love. So, I think the place to start is to ask the question, what's the state of my love for Christ today? And it is very easy, especially after—this is normal after you've just been a Christian for a little while, much less if you're facing pressure from inside and outside, right? It's very normal that we kind of fall into an assumed form of Christianity. I'm just a Christian, but there's not a lot of wonder and enjoyment in the gospel. We don't hunger for the Word of God. We don't long to just receive the Word of God. Sometimes we can diagnose that as simply as, I just don't have an appetite to spend time in God's Word; I don't have an appetite to go to church, really. I'll go to church when I happen to be around on a Sunday and there's not something more fun I could be doing, you know? But that's not just like a fact of life, 'Well, I've got to do some fun things on weekends sometimes,' it's actually a sign that what we do when we gather together as a church is we sit under God's Word together. We look at God's Word. We get renewed by God's Word. We get to renew our love and singing and receiving the Lord's Supper. And that just may not be interesting to you right now even if you call yourself a Christian. It just may not really be motivating. And if that's the case, then you've lost the love you had at first, right? And so, I think the practical outwork of that is we may need to just pray and pursue revival and renewal, and that would be for our own hearts and that would be for our church as a whole. I have found there's quite a few times, usually at least once a year, I go through a season where, if I'm honest, I don't have a strong appetite for God's Word. And I'm not super in love with the gospel. And I have found that in those times I will just pray. Sometimes it's just feeble prayers, but if I will pray that God will renew my love and give me fresh hunger for His Word and fresh enjoyment of being His son, and help me see fresh wonder in the gospel that I feel like I've heard over and over again. I've just found it's amazing how often God will renew my love. So, I think that's the first application for us. Before we get to the works, let's talk about the condition of our hearts.

Autumn: The first love. So, pray for, pursue, revival and renewal, particularly for ourselves first, that we assess that and spend time with God, asking Him to search our hearts, to assess the state of our love for Him, to seek renewal and revival in our hearts and lives. And then what would you say next?

Hunter: Yeah, I think the second one is He says, do the works you did first. We need to do works of evangelism and mission. And that's really practical to ask the question, what would it look like for me to live into in God's mission? What are some things I could do for some of us that could be serving in a ministry area, whether that's inside or outside the church? For me, sometimes that's been outside the church. That's going to bring me into contact with people who need to know the love of Christ. Mentoring—for example, save Our Youth—was like that; it came to me at a busy time in my life when I didn't necessarily feel like I've got extra capacity to do this, but I felt like the Lord was telling me, I want you to do this—I want you to make space for this as a way of doing the works, just being involved in the work, that I've called you to always be involved in, which is outward focus, mission, and evangelism. I want you to mentor someone. So, I did, and God did a renewing work in me through that habit. He gave me a fresh love first for a young man who I was mentoring, but also just for people. He gave me a fresh love for people and enjoyment for people through that. I see that in some of our folks who are mentoring through Cross Purpose, for example. It could be, I'm going to invest in a non-Christian

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friend, and I'm going to invite them to church this Sunday. We baptized a young lady who had been literally invested and invited to a church by a friend of hers, and she stood up engaged. She read her story of how she had come to faith in Jesus out of a season of real darkness in her life and trying to practice Judaism. And then she named the friend who had begun to invest in her and invite her to church. She named specific people. And I thought, that's beautiful. And all they did was really invest in her and invite her—they invited her into their community. She heard the gospel in multiple ways as a result of that. In a fellowship group, in worship services, in discussions with her friends, she heard the gospel in multiple ways, and she embraced Christ. That's doing the work we did at first. So, I think we all need to take practical steps to do that.

Autumn: One of those steps can also be just honestly thinking about who those people are in your life. That's a good first step. And we've done something as a staff team a couple of times recently when we set aside time for prayer specifically for people in our lives who we know who don't know God, to ask that God would give us the opportunity to speak with them and to bring other people into their lives who could potentially introduce them to the gospel, particularly for people who may not live in close connection with us or live somewhere else geographically. But we've set aside time to pray for them, and that has been so refreshing for my heart and soul, but also has reminded me those people who I've spent time praying for now have been top of mind, and I've sought out more interactions with them because I took time to just simply think and jot down their names.

Autumn: I love it. That's a great example. And as I said when I interrupted you, that's probably the place to start, right? Just be aware and pray, alright?

Autumn: So, first assess the state of our hearts, pray for and pursue revival and renewal, and then pray for other people who don't know God and ask—I think what you said, Hunter, is key, 'make space for that,' so, you said God called you to mentor in a time when you didn't think you had space for that in your life—so, also ask God to help you just make space to interact with,

Hunter: and the way I had to make space was by forcing it in, it was, dang it, I'm going to make this happen. It took some grit, and it was not as clean and neat as I would like it to sound. When I say I'm making space, it was more like, no, I'm going to cram this in and adjust and figure it out as I go.

Autumn: Is there anything else as we think about this first love, first works, returning to those first works, what else do we either need to be mindful of or do?

Hunter: I think we really covered the practical side of it in terms of just how does this start and begin. Our listeners may be inspired with other things, and if they are, I'd love to hear them. The one thing I'll just add to kind of be mindful of, and this is not a practical it's just like hopeful, is this: when you're actually engaged with real people in helping them see Jesus and you're pouring into their life, when you're engaged with real people, it actually makes it easier to navigate these cultural pressures. They actually don't feel as painful when you actually can see the difference it's making in someone's life and that the gospel is making in someone's life and that you are making in their life by being used by Jesus in this way. So, I think doing the works is critical to renewing the love. So, there's the love, there's the works; these things kind of flow together. And as we do that, the allure or the strength of this cultural pressure actually kind of starts to go away a little bit because we're just reminded over and over again the gospel is magnificent and life-giving in a way that nothing else is. I was reminded that on Sunday when Sam, the lady who was baptized, read her story. I was just like, yes,

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the gospel is beautiful, and Jesus is beautiful. This is why we do this. My heart was filled, right? And it makes the pressure feel not so bad.

Autumn: Interestingly, we've talked about the church in Ephesus and our church and how we face these external pressures and internal pressures, sometimes those external pressures and the internal temptations to compromise create fractures we see all over in the American church right now. And returning to this, retaining this first love, asking, praying for renewal and revival in our own hearts and lives, and that active reminder that this is not only an intellectual pursuit, but it is also it necessitates sort of the state of our hearts. So, focusing on that, on our first love, and then engaging in these things that in this passage in Revelation are called the first works, this is actually what unifies our church and the Church, the family of God, at large.

Hunter: And as you were saying that, something came to mind for me as you were saying that. And it's this: I can tend to get really bothered by the fracturing of the big "C" Church. I'm just troubled by that. It's weighty, in fact, that is more weighty to me than the pressure from outside the world. I kind of expect it from the world. I'm always disappointed and grieved when it's happening in the Church. So, the state of the church can really start to weigh me down. I can really be discouraged when I get on Twitter and I see all the things people are arguing about and the accusations that are allowed back and forth and how different sectors are reacting. And I think, oh, here's the political captivity of this side of the Church, here's the theological captivity of this side. And I just get so discouraged, and as you were kind of describing that, I was feeling how discouraged I can get. And then I was reminded the times when I'm least discouraged are actually the times when I'm most engaged in the mission of Jesus. And so, I would say to those who are really discouraged by the state of the Church, and maybe you're even angsty about it, if you'll get involved in the outward mission of Jesus to witness to Him and to bring people to faith in Him and to disciple people into Him and let that occupy yourself, your energy, it also makes this sorry condition of the Church more bearable as well.

Autumn: Even though this passage is written to a church, much of the way we've discussed this today as far as our own response is individual praying for revival and renewal in our own heart and then engaging in service that our church here at Fellowship is engaged. And so, we mentioned Cross Purpose, Save Our Youth, these are partners who are engaging in mission around the city and who we join with and encourage our people to also join with. There are many, many ways that that sort of response and those first works can look when put into practice in someone's life, but we also institutionally, as a church, want to be mindful of how we do this, what we are promoting, how we're encouraging each other not only to grow, to engage in rhythms of repentance and renewal, but also what we do organizationally and programmatically. So, I think this has given rise, all of this study and your thought on this, Hunter, has also given rise to something else programmatically that we're doing in the church. And I wonder if you would just talk a little bit about that, about this new Exploring Faith group that you'll be leading.

Hunter: Well, I'm starting just a group. And I anticipate it being a fairly small group. I don't know how many people will join us, but I'm starting a group this fall in partnership with Michael Goldstein, our Student Minister. We're going to host a group called Exploring Faith for people who would like to either start or rekindle a relationship with God, a vital relationship with God. And this is for people who might not call themselves Christians, or this is also for people who might say, at one point in my life I was a Christian and I have, to use the popular term, deconstructed, or I'm rethinking my faith, and I need some help with that. And I really felt led by the Spirit to do that out of my reflection on this passage, which started months and months ago. And I just sensed I need to be engaged in the work I did in the early days of planting Fellowship Denver, which was really engaging with people right where they are in their journeys of faith to help

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them come to full, complete, joyful faith in Jesus. And as the church has grown, as my job has gotten more complicated, as our team has grown, there's all kinds of things that I'm stretched and pulled to give myself to subtly, I think I've given myself less to these first works. And so, I was, very similar to the illustration I gave about mentoring years ago, I just thought, I need to wedge this into my life somewhere, and so I'm going to do it. I have the benefit of having a little bit of a notoriety because I stand on stage and preach. I'm going to offer myself to people in this way and see who the Lord brings, and pray for who the Lord might want to use.

Autumn: And this first group begins September 15th. So if you're listening to it after the 15th, then it will have already started. Is this Exploring Faith group and community something you're hoping will be a regular part of this, woven into our rhythms as a church? So, something that our church family can invite friends and folks to who they know?

Hunter: I do hope that. And we'll see how the first one goes; I'm sure we'll learn a lot, and then we'll do it again.

Autumn: Well, Hunter, thank you. I have a lot to think about in light of this passage. This is such a good reminder, and often I think we need these reminders about this focus on the gospel that beautifies and influences and directs really all of our lives. And also, in it, it's reminding me that the temptations to worship so many other things, the things that vie for our attention and our time and our worship and energy are always going to be plentiful. It was true for the Ephesians, it's true for us. But this focus actually orders the rest of our lives and gives us a sense of not only meaning and purpose, but also order as we go about our days, which, as you said, are so often filled with demands on our time. And this helps us know what we should actually make time for and give ourselves to, and that is so helpful in the things that compete in our minds and hearts and for our time. Hunter, thanks for spending time with me today on the podcast.

Hunter: Thanks for hosting this conversation.

Autumn: Yes, I'm glad you were able to share with us in our church, too, how meaningful this has been in your life and what you were able to share with these other church leaders at this conference. So, thanks for joining me and for sharing this. If you have questions, comments, suggestions, whether about today's episode or something you'd like to hear us discuss on the podcast in the future, you can send all of that any time to podcast@fellowshipdenver.org. Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Special thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music, to Jesse Cowan, our producer, and to Judd Connell, who provides transcription for these episodes.