

**8/1/21 “Ephesus: When Love Grows Cold”  
Revelation 2:1-7**

Welcome...

Churches develop reputations. “There is a conservative church ... liberal church ... strong Bible-teaching church ... socially minded church ... traditional church ... contemporary church ... elder led church ... the congregational run church ... and the list goes on.

However, of all the things that could be said about a church, I believe nothing could be more precious and meaningful than it be said, “that is a church that loves Jesus fervently. It is clear that Jesus is their first love.” Well, of all the many good things one might say about the church at Ephesus, that is the one thing you could not say. In fact, nothing could be more alarming or upsetting to hear Jesus Himself say, “I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”

**Let’s read Revelation 2:1-7...**

Why does a church stop loving Jesus and what, if anything, can be done about it? To those questions our Lord provides an answer in our text.

This letter was written to the church at Ephesus. But each member of the church was responsible for his response. So was every member of the seven churches that will be addressed in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. In these special messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor, the Lord gave each church an “X ray” of its condition. But He intended for all the churches to read these messages and benefit from them. (Note the plural “churches” in Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.)

While letter was not written to us, it was written for us. And as we study each of the letters written to the seven churches, you must examine your own heart. So let me be up front and ask you:

Is Jesus the first love of your life? Is it clear you love Jesus by how you spend your time, what you pursue, and what you talk about?

Has there been a time when you loved Jesus passionately with all of your heart, but now that love has waned and even grown cold?

Thankfully Jesus not only exposes the problem but provides the solution. In our text Jesus provides four steps to expose the issue but also inform us how to return to Christ as your first love.

My prayer is that each of us has Jesus as our first love. The church in Ephesus had a reputation for being biblically, doctrinally, theologically, educationally strong. And in many ways the same can be said about Cornerstone Community Church. But if love for Jesus and love for others is not the primary motivation of our hearts, then Cornerstone Community Church will begin to die. That’s the warning that Jesus gives here. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8:1, “Knowledge makes one conceited, knowledge puffs up, it makes for a big head and small heart but love edifies people, builds up.” Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:5, “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

We need the proper balance of truth and love. Like a bird needs two wings to fly, so we each need truth and love. The first step that Jesus takes in the church in Ephesus is:

**I. Jesus Examines Their Reputation Verses 1-3, 6**

Ephesus had become a center of commerce, one of the most prosperous cities in the ancient world. Three major trade routes met at Ephesus. It also contained one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: the temple of the goddess Artemis (see Acts 19), which at 425 feet by 220 feet was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. The gospel was introduced to city of Ephesus by Paul's close friends and partners in ministry, Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18–19). They were soon joined by the eloquent preacher and powerful debater Apollos (Acts 18:24–26). Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos laid the groundwork for Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 20).

Paul's protégé Timothy served as pastor of the church at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). Onesiphorus (2 Timothy 1:16, 18) and Tychicus (2 Tim 4:12), two more of Paul's fellow laborers, also ministered at Ephesus. Finally, according to the testimony of the early church, the apostle John spent the last decades of his life at Ephesus, from which he likely wrote his three epistles (1,2,3 John). John was no doubt leading the Ephesian church when he was arrested and exiled to Patmos.

So, the church at Ephesus was a strong church with a rich biblical heritage and from this church the rest of the seven churches were founded. It is now four decades later when Jesus begins his address in verse 1...

The word "angel" comes from the Greek word *angelos*. The word's principal use in the Bible is in reference to heavenly angels. But it is also used to refer to human messengers (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52). In fact, the Scriptures are always given to men, to messengers and to leaders. And since we don't get to the futuristic part of the book until chapter four, there is every reason to assume that the word angel here in verse 1 means messenger, which would be a representative from the Ephesian church, most likely the pastor.

Jesus identifies Himself to this church as the one "who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks among the golden lamp stands."

"Holds" means to firmly grip, indicating the authority Jesus exercises over the leadership of the church. The "right hand" is a place of strict accountability, strong protection, and strategic usefulness.

Christ walks among the seven golden lampstands, the seven churches, evaluating them. Church growth experts teach the key to growth is to ask what guests see when they visit your church. But the real key is to ask what Jesus sees as He walks through the church.

What does Christ see in our worship services, preaching, teaching, community groups, Bible studies, Sunday school classrooms counseling sessions?

What does Jesus see in our offices and parking lots?

What does Jesus see when He follows us home from church?

In verse 2, the Lord delivers His evaluation and begins with the declaration, "I know." Jesus makes this statement to each of the seven churches. He says it to us today, "I see all things and I know all things." You can fool some people all the time. You can fool all people sometime. You can never fool Jesus. He knows us fully, perfectly, and completely.

But notice the letter begins with compliments, not criticism. It begins with commendation not complaint. Christ tells the church what's right before He tells them what's wrong. He starts with their:

### **A. Sacrificial Deeds**

Verse 2 says, "I know your deeds, your toil and your perseverance."

“Toil” means to work to the point of exhaustion. They wore themselves out for the mission and message of Christ. “Perseverance” means to endure under a heavy load. There were times when it was difficult for the members of this church to follow Christ. But they did not forsake the Lord. They carried heavy burdens for Christ without giving up. The church in Ephesus was not only known for their sacrificial deeds, but the Lord also commends their:

### **B. Sound Doctrine**

The doctrinal fidelity of this church is seen in their holy intolerance of sinning members. Verse 2 says, “I know... you cannot tolerate evil men.”

Verse 6 says, “Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” The Nicolaitans are only mentioned twice in Scripture. Their deeds are mentioned here in Revelation 2:6. Their doctrine is mentioned in Revelation 2:14-15...

Back in Numbers 22 and following, Balaam came along and seduced God’s people into idolatry, seduced God’s people into immorality. Balaam was a prophet, but came along and instead of leading people to godliness, he led them to sin, to idolatry and to immorality. That’s what Balaam did. The letter to Pergamum links the Nicolaitans with Balaam’s false teaching that led Israel astray.

Clement of Alexandria identified the Nicolaitans as those who “lead a life of self-indulgence” (The Stromata 2. 20). Tertullian asserted that the Nicolaitans aimed at destroying the happiness of sanctity by their lust and luxury.

How in the world this could ever be allowed in the church, as it was in Pergamum in 2:15, is shocking, but here in Ephesus it was not allowed. They could spot a Nicolaitan because they could test the false teaching and immoral living. They were faithful to teach the truth and to obey the Lord even when it came to church discipline. They took the word of God literally and obeyed what Jesus said in Matthew 18. They called sin by its name. They could not tolerate counterfeit Christians.

In Acts 20:28-30, Paul instructed the Ephesian elders: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in from among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

Paul’s ominous predictions came to pass. But false teachers were unable to harm the church at Ephesus. Notice again Revelation 2:2 says: “I know... how you put to test those who call themselves apostles and they are not, and you found them to be false.” When an “apostle” showed up, the church in Ephesus tested him. If he did not line up with the apostles’ doctrine, they rejected him.

Third, the Lord commends their steadfast diligence.

### **C. Steadfast Diligence**

Verse 3 says...

Christians were persecuted, ridiculed, and maligned. But the church at Ephesus “patiently endured.” Verse 2 says they could not tolerate those who are evil. Using the same word, verse 3 says they have endured for Christ’s name sake.

They were faithful to the Word, faithful to the work, faithful to the Lord, faithful to the criteria by which you judge people; and in it all through the spiritual discernment, through the trouble, through all of it, they had never grown weary and always with the right motive – notice in verse 3 “for My name’s sake.” Which means they did it all for the glory of Christ.

In Paul’s parting words to the church at Ephesus he declared in Acts 20:27, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” The Ephesus church knew the counsel of God. They not only had heard it, but they had seen it exemplified in the life of the apostle Paul. They were zealous. They were biblically literate. They were evangelistic. They were solid in doctrine. They were committed to the Lord. But all of those combined could not substitute for the love of Christ they had forsaken.

So, Jesus first examines their reputation and secondly:

## **II. Jesus Exposes The Reality**

Verse 4...

There are three verses of commendation. There is only one complaint. Verse 14 says to the church of Pergamum, “But I have a few things against you.” The Lord only had one thing against Ephesus. But it was so serious that he threatened to remove its lamp stand from its place, if they did not repent.

The heart of the problem was the problem of the heart. Jesus declares, “You have left your first love.” This complaint may point upward, inward, or outward. It may be love for Christ, love for one another, or love for the lost. The tone and content point to love for Christ.

To love the Lord is the main thing – in fact the vertical love determines the love on the horizontal. This church in Ephesus had everything but the main thing. They had not lost their first love. Jesus says in verse 4 “you have your first love.” It did not take place all at once. Little by little, the church drifted away until it abandoned its first love.

To the wives here, imagine your husband says to, “I don’t love you anymore. But nothing will change. I’ll still earn a living, sleep with you, and father your children. I just don’t love you anymore.” How would that make you feel? To leave your first love is to say, “Lord, I don’t love you like I once did. But I’ll still come to church. I’ll sing, I’ll pray, and I’ll give my money, my time and my talents. I just don’t love you.”

This is what happened in the church at Ephesus. They forsook their devotion to Christ. All that remained was dead orthodoxy, headless morality, empty religion.

Listen friend, it can happen to you! Loving theology cannot replace loving Jesus. Loving being right cannot replace humbly being right with Jesus. Labor is no substitute for love. Purity is no substitute for passion. Deeds are no substitute for devotion.

Ministry is based on love. In John 21 when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples and then reconfirmed Peter in the ministry, He did not ask Peter, “Are you willing to serve me, Peter? Have you got your doctrine straightened out, Peter? Do you know how to recognize a false prophet, Peter? Are you going to endure, Peter, through all the hardships? Are you dealing with sin, Peter? Do you hate sin?” No, three times Jesus asked him, “Peter, do you ... love Me?”

Has it happened to you? If there was a time when you loved Jesus more than you do now. Have you left your first love?

Jesus Examines Their Reputation  
Jesus Exposes The Reality

### **III. Jesus Explains The Remedy**

Verse 5...

The church in Ephesus turned into the service of performance. It turned into a place where they defended their theology rather than love Jesus with all their heart, love one another, and love the lost. So Jesus not only exposes the reality but He explains the remedy in three words, three imperatives, three commands:

#### **A. Remember**

Verse 5 says, “Remember from where you have fallen.” The church at Ephesus had fallen from the heights of devotion to Christ and needed to be restored. The first step was to remember from where they had fallen.

A lot of us have trouble in our Christian life, not from what we’ve never known, but from what we’ve forgotten. Some things you must remember. Remember what it was like when God’s grace first gripped you. You may not remember the moment you were saved. But you should remember the aftermath of God’s grace that saved you by the blood of Christ.

In two weeks we have a Discovering Cornerstone class and one of my favorite parts is hearing the testimony of how people are saved.

Can you remember what it was like when you first came to Jesus and the weight of your sins was lifted from your heart? Can you remember when just the mention of His name brought tears to your eyes? Can you remember when your heart was tender and it felt like you were talking to Him face to face. Can you remember being so in love with Jesus you could not help sharing the good news of the gospel with your friends and family?

Go back to the time when your love for Jesus was all that mattered. What was it like? What is missing now?

#### **B. Repent**

Matthew 22:37 records the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” Love for God is our greatest spiritual duty. Love for Christ is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. To know the Lord is to love the Lord. To allow love to grow cold is sin. The church at Ephesus was in sin. Jesus commanded them to remember and repent of their sin.

What is repentance? Repent (aorist imperative) – to change your mind resulting in a change of attitude and action. Think differently about your sin; sins of indifference, religious formalism, legalistic routine.

Do not pat yourself on the back for doing good things for the wrong reason. God looks at the heart. Where is your heart in all of this?!

Jesus says remember, repent and:

#### **C. Return**

Verse 5 says “do the deeds you did at first”

Love is more than emotion. Love is what you do. 1 John 3:18 says, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

This is the second “first” in the text. There is the first love in verse 4; now there are the first deeds. What are the first deeds? Jesus does not specify. He leaves it to you to fill in the blanks. The first deeds are whatever you did when you loved Christ at first. Go back to the basics.

Back to reading the Bible; back to praying; back to witnessing; back to testifying; back to crying; back to praising His name; we need to get back to the things that marked us when we were deeply in love with Jesus. Get before Him today and ask Him to show you the way back.

The place where you first fell in love is the place where you first understood He loved you, not because you deserved it or could even earn it, but because He just did. The place where you first fell in love was probably somewhere near the cross.

The imperatives, three commands from the Lord: remember, repent and return.

Failure to obey His commands would bring dire consequences. Notice at the end of verse 5 Jesus warns, “Repent, or else I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” If this church did not heed the Lord’s final call, Jesus promises to remove your lampstand out of its place. The church is compared to a lampstand because we are to be a light for Jesus, but if the love for Him is gone then He will snuff the light out.

This is what ultimately happened. The city and church of Ephesus are no more. It is only as we love Christ fervently that we can serve Him faithfully.

We have seen Jesus Examines Their Reputation, Jesus Exposes The Reality, and Jesus Explains The Remedy.

In Verse 7:

#### **IV. Jesus Expounds The Reward**

Verse 7...

The letter to Ephesus closes with a three-old exhortation and a promise.

##### **A. Commit**

Christ’s exhortation “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” is call to commit to hear and put into practice what He teaches.

This emphasizes the sober responsibility that each of us have to heed God’s voice in Scripture. Notice secondly Jesus addresses this, “To him who overcomes.”

##### **B. Conquer**

The term “overcomer” does not refer to those who have attained to a higher level of the Christian life, but identifies all Christians. The apostle John defines it that way in 1 John 5:4-5, “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

Revelation 2:7 says, “To the one who overcomes I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

### **C. Celebrate**

The tree of life was in the Garden of Eden. The Lord banished Adam from the Garden, lest he also eat from the tree of life and so live forever in his fallen condition (Genesis 3:22-23). The second Adam, Jesus Christ, will grant the one who overcomes to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God.

At Calvary, Jesus said to the penitent criminal hanging beside him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” All who trust the blood and righteousness of Christ will live with God forever. John 10:28 says, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

In closing, we have learned from this letter to Ephesus that it is possible to be busy for God without being a blessing for God. In other words, it is possible to have religious efforts without redemptive effects; it is possible to have sacred activity without any lasting spiritual value. It is possible to love theology in your head but not love Jesus in your heart. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:2-3, “If I have the gifts of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith . . . And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”

It is possible to have a lofty reputation outside the church without having loving relationships inside the church.

I want you to be honest with yourself and with your Lord for just a moment. Have you left your first love? Are you busy, but busy out of duty and not out of love? Can you honestly say that you are filled with fervent, emotional, extravagant love for Jesus? Or, would you have to say that your love for Jesus has grown cold and is not somewhat mechanical. It is not what it used to be, it is not what it could be, your love for Jesus is not what it should be. You need to remember, repent and return to Him. If He has touched your heart, you need to run to Him. The time is now and the place is here.

Let's pray...