

Revelation 2:1–7

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[0 : 0 0] Again, that's Revelation 2, 1 to 7. Please stand as you are able for the reading of God's word. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

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 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. But I have this against you, that you have 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.

Yet this you have. You hate the work of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

[1 : 1 2] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, let me add again my welcome to you here at Christ Church Chicago.

We are glad to see you this morning. Last week, Pastor Helm began our new series in Revelation by lifting up this incredible picture of the risen, glorified Christ.

Can you see it? The Son of Man, hair like wool, eyes like a flame of fire, feet like burnished bronze, a voice that roared like the ocean, and a face that shines like the sun that can't be eclipsed.

Can you see it? Representing both encouraging comfort and necessary correction, it is this portrait that you should hold in your mind as we now hear what Jesus has to say to the church.

Roger comes home from work and he tells his wife of 10 years, Mary, I'm sorry, have to tell you this, but I just don't love you anymore.

[2 : 5 9] Totally shocked, dismayed, and now in tears, Mary says, Roger, are you asking me for a divorce?

Oh, no, replies Roger. I still want to be married. I'm not going anywhere. I still want to live together in the same house.

I still want to raise the kids together. I still want us to do life together. In every general functional sense of the word, we can stay married. I just don't love you anymore.

Mary says, you mean you want to go through the motions of marriage? you want to reap the potential benefits of being married without possessing the love upon which marriage is built and sustained?

how on earth will that work? Well, it won't.

[4 : 13] But let me say that no more will it work for a loveless marriage than it will work for a loveless church. In our text today, despite all appearances to the contrary, the church at Ephesus gets called out in the first letter of the seven to go out for abandoning their first love.

for having everything but the main thing. This letter serves as an admonition and a warning, not just for the church then, but for our church today.

And further, the eternal implications are not just for us as a congregation, but also for us individually. Because if we're not careful, we are all susceptible to having our love wax cold.

Here's the simple exhortation for today. Here it is. Get back to your first love. Get back to your first love.

Ephesus, located on the west coast of Asia Minor, was the de facto capital of this province, primarily because of its economic strength, diverse population, its cultural wealth, and religious activities.

[5 : 43] To visit Ephesus in the first century would be like visiting Chicago. or New York City today. In this great city, there was, by all accounts, a great church.

Started by Paul, led by Timothy, taught by Apollos, served by Aquila and Priscilla. The church at Ephesus had an unrivaled legacy.

And at the time of this letter, it continued to have a dynamic ministry. Yet, something was missing. And Ephesus was on the verge of possible severe judgment because it was married, but not in love anymore.

Lehman Strauss once wrote, love is the first essential in Christian character. And when it commences to decline, the soul begins to drift.

The church at Ephesus had a great work, had great work ethic, clean hands, strong shoulders, had an upright heart, but its soul, like a rudderless ship, was beginning to drift.

[7 : 03] and it was on a collision course with spiritual disaster. Jesus through this love note reached out to them and reaches out to us today to pull us back to the shoreline of safety before it's too late.

Here it is. This letter today is not written to us, but it is written for us. We are, as Pastor Helm said last week, literally reading someone else's mail.

But if the shoe fits, wear it and get back to your first love.

In our text this morning, we see Jesus give clarification to the church, he commends the church, he criticizes the church, and then he challenges the church.

Starting in verse 1, Jesus provides some clarification through his salutation. To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

[8 : 27] First, Jesus clearly establishes who this letter is for. Let me pull over for just a moment to say, as Revelation is a book full of signs and symbolism, there's been a lot of discussion about who this angel of the church is.

There are those who say this is actually a supernatural, heavenly being on assignment, and those who say this angel is referring to a human being, the pastor, teacher of the church who regularly delivers God's word to his people.

My assignment this morning is not to resolve that, nor do I want you all to get stuck there. However you parse the term angel, or the literal translation messenger, what is important is that it is clear this message is to and for and about the church, the whole church.

Further, Jesus makes clear who this letter is from, of the message. Before you're tempted to delete this email, or send it to your spam folder, let me clearly establish how important this message is by identifying right up front who it's from.

Anybody in this room familiar with junk mail? You get some random message from some random person or entity, or some random phone call telling you that you just won a trip to Hawaii, God bid, you order something online, and now you're inundated with more random messages from seemingly everyone who's ever been associated with the product you just purchased.

[10 : 30] Think about it. Tell me, what letter, what email could you receive that would cause you to stop in your tracks and immediately open it to read?

perhaps it's one that says IRS on the front of it. Well, J-E-S-U-S is saying these are the words of him, Christ, who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands.

Pay attention. This is a critically important message. Looking now a little closer at the source of this message, he holds the seven stars in his right hand.

This is a reference to Christ's authority, control, possession, comfort, provision for his churches. They are and so are we in the hand that heaven and earth has been given.

And as the one who holds them, he will also provide for them, protect them, and enable them for his work. He walks among the golden lamp stands.

[11 : 51] This not only speaks to Jesus' immediate presence in the church, but it is also that Jesus is walking in the midst of the church, examining them, taking stock in what they are doing.

Church grows growth experts teach that the key to growth is to ask guests what they see when they visit your church. But I submit this morning that the real key is to ask what the Lord sees when he walks through your church.

What does Christ see in our worship services? What does Christ see in our Bible studies, community groups, counseling sessions? What does Jesus see in our front offices, boardrooms, break rooms, and parking lots?

What does he see when he follows us home from church? Is he pleased with what he sees? Here's one final note of clarification.

At the very beginning of verse 2, he says, I know your works. Jesus actually makes this statement to each of the seven churches, and he says it to us today.

[13 : 07] This is encouraging on one hand, because for many who have felt forgotten, unseen, or that nobody notices what you do, Jesus says, I know, and I see.

But this is also a word of caution, in that he's also saying, hey, you can fool some of the people all the time, you can fool all the people sometime, but you can never fool me.

I know you perfectly, completely, fully. My mother used to say, you might get by, but you won't get away.

Starting now in verses 2 and 3, Jesus begins his important message for the church with compliments instead of criticism. He commends the church.

Side note, this is also a great example of great leadership and good relationship. You know there are people you hate to see coming, whether it's at work or at school, because the first thing out of their mouth is going to be something critical, something negative.

[14 : 22] you should do the opposite. And here, Jesus starts by commending three aspects of congregational life at Ephesus.

These things should also be great markers for us as a church. First, he commends their sacrificial labor. verse two, I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance.

Works, of course, refers to deeds, activities. The church was spiritually active, which is commendable. No church succeeds on spare time, loose change, or nominal commitment.

Healthy churches are working churches. He also mentions their toil, which literally means to work to the point of exhaustion.

This was not a church whose members were only engaged when it was convenient. They wore themselves out for the mission and message of Christ. He lastly commends them in this line for their patient endurance, which means to endure under a heavy, heavy load.

[15 : 44] There were times it had to be difficult for them, but they did not forsake the Lord. They continued to carry heavy burdens in the name of Christ without giving up.

The second aspect Jesus commends was for their moral and doctrinal purity. Still in verse 2, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and found them to be false.

This church refused to allow apostasy and immorality to go on in the church. They did not allow carnal members or counterfeit ministers.

Yeah, I know, Matthew 7, 1, judge not that you be not judged, seems to have become the golden verse of American Christianity. But somehow this verse then gets twisted to mean that no one has the right to question our testimony, particularly when our lifestyle contradicts our profession.

The church at Ephesus had a high moral standard, and so should we. Further, the text says they tested those who called themselves apostles.

[17 : 11] When an apostle or preacher showed up, they tested him, and if he did not line up with sound doctrine, they rejected him. That is seen again down further in verse 6, when they are commended again for hating the works of the Nicolaitans, which was a heretical sect of false teachers that were around spewing out false doctrine that Jesus also hated.

That church, our church, shouldn't fall for it. Mark this down. The issue is not if a man can preach, but what that man is preaching.

We used to have to have a saying growing up, some preachers were called, some preachers were sent, and some preachers just bundled up and went. Church, we must never forsake biblical truth for easy compliance to societal norms.

We need integrity, doctrinal conviction, and courage in the pulpit. Lastly, they were commended for their steadfast endurance.

Verse 3 says, I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my namesake, and you have not grown weary. Christians were routinely being persecuted, ridiculed, and maligned, but the church at Ephesus endured patiently.

[18 : 44] Have you ever been there? Have you ever gone through a time when there seemed to be so much opposition that it was difficult to stay on the path Christ had called you to?

My encouragement to you this morning, like the church at Ephesus, is to hang in there, hold on, and endure patiently. Now, there are no perfect churches.

Why? Because you and I are in it. And none of us are perfect. However, from the outside looking in, Ephesus seemed to be about as close to perfect a church as you could get.

If you would have attended a service at Ephesus, you would have thought this church really has it going on. You would think Jesus would just close the letter right here and say, keep up the good work and just move on to the next church.

church. And I'm sure the church was feeling pretty good about itself to this point in the letter. But lurking underneath all that good work was a problem.

[20 : 09] And now Jesus turns from compliment to criticism of this very same church. Starting here in verse 4, but, King James version says nevertheless, meaning despite all of this I just said, I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

where is the love? Something happened to their love for God and their love for one another, which are inextricably linked to one another.

Matthew 22, 1 John 4, they were failing to live out the greatest commandment. This church had everything but the main thing.

Notice the verbiage here. They didn't lose their first love. They abandoned it. They left it. They intentionally, willfully walked away from it.

It may not have happened all at once, but little by little, this church drifted away until it had totally abandoned its first love.

[21 : 31] Love. love. Those of you who are or who have ever been in love knows how it starts.

The butterflies when they walk into the room. You think about them all the time. You want to be around them all the time.

You spend money on things you can't even afford. You talk on the phone for hours. You hang up. No, you hang up.

No, you hang up. I remember talking on the phone to Nico one night. We were still dating at the time and I woke up the next morning only to realize we were still on the phone.

Girl, I gotta go to work. But this powerful love despite how wonderful it may have been in the beginning somehow, some way, over time, this church, as can happen to all of us, walked away from it.

[22 : 46] Stories told of a couple who rode home from dinner after celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary. Weeping in the car, the wife asked her husband, do you remember the way it used to be?

We used to ride so close together people couldn't even tell who was driving. Now we sit so very far apart. Doesn't that bother you?

The husband replied, no, because I'm not the one who moved. There was a separation between the Lord and the church in Ephesus and there may indeed be separation between some of you and the Lord this morning, but I'm here to tell you that it's not the Lord who moved.

It's you. Like in my opening illustration, to abandon 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, I'll give, I'll volunteer, I just don't love you.

This is what happened to the church at Ephesus. They lost their warmth and zeal for Christ. they began to go through the motions of good works, not motivated by the love of and for Christ, but by the works themselves.

[24 : 22] Their affection was dried up. Their works and beliefs had descended to the mechanical. What once was a fiery love relationship had cooled into mere religion.

Their passion for him became little more than cold orthodoxy and heartless morality. Spurgeon said, a church has no reason for being a church when she has no love within her heart or when that love grows cold.

Lose love, lose all. Church, it can happen to us. Individually, it can happen to you. Ask yourself, is the fire of your love for Christ still burning like it once was.

I'm not just talking about a feeling because feelings will fool you, but an abiding desire and zeal for him that is a regular central feature and pattern for your life.

love. Get back to your first love. Now, what I love about the Lord is that he doesn't just lay out the problem, doesn't just lay out the issue.

[25 : 44] Anybody can do that. He also gives us the solution. And by his amazing grace, there is, praise God, still hope for those who may have abandoned their first love.

Starting at verse five, the Lord now challenges this loveless church and indeed us today with three ways to restore our first love.

He challenges us to remember, to repent, and to return. To remember, repent, and return. This challenge to remember is a call to reflect, to go back and recall the past.

Remember where you were with God. Remember the zeal and the love for God that you had at the beginning. Think about where you used to be in your relationship with God and consider how far you may have fallen.

We need to ask ourselves what happened? Why would we leave the love we previously had? What is going on in our lives that has brought our relationship with God into a ritual or a to-do list?

[26 : 58] Have we lost our awe of him? Are we still even impressed by his creation? Have we allowed the mundane to crowd our minds so that our routines keep us from reflecting on the majesty of God?

The grammatical emphasis of this challenge encourages perpetual recollection. Church, you've got to go back and remember and keep remembering. Remember what it was like when his grace first gripped you.

Remember how you once were lost but now you're found. How you were blind but now you see. Jesus challenges the church to remember.

He then says repent. To repent is to change your mind so you can change your direction. It is to make a U-turn in your life.

It is to acknowledge your way is wrong and God's way is right. This is an urgent appeal for instant change of attitude and conduct before it's too late.

[28 : 10] To repent is to come back to God. Let me say here that this is for those of you who have left your first love and it's for those of you who have yet to fall in love with Jesus in the first place.

Once you discover who Christ is, once you've tasted and seen just how good he is, you won't be able to help but fall in love with him.

The first step is simply to have an honest conversation with Jesus. Confess your sins, apologize for them, ask for forgiveness, invite Jesus into your life and commit to follow him.

I invite you today, today, to experience a love far greater than anything you've ever felt before. later here in our text, Jesus also says, once you remember and repent, Jesus challenges us to return.

Go back to the basics. We see this in sports all the time when a team starts making silly mistakes. Dropping the ball, missing tackles, being called for penalties, fouls, blowing off practices because you already think you know everything there is to know.

[29 : 38] The coach will often tell the team it's time to go back to the fundamentals. Here, coach Jesus says, go back to the things you were doing when you first fell in love with me.

Go back to how you used to spend time in the word. Go back to how you used to pray. Go back to how excited you were to tell others about Jesus. Go back to when you weren't bored with the sermon and your Bible was full of notes.

Go back to when the simplest of things moved you with compassion to help your brother in need. Return to the works you did at first and get back to your first love.

This church is serious. This is serious because failure to remember, repent, and return leads to repercussions.

That alliteration was just for Pastor Bing. Remember, repent, and return because if you don't, it leads to repercussions.

[30 : 51] The end of verse five. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

The Lord was and is saying either you do these things or you will lose your light-bearing capacity. Here it is.

Mark this down. Left love means lost light. Left love means lost light.

I will remove your light and my presence. My God, this is almost worse than extinction because Jesus is saying, I'll let the church live, but I just won't be there anymore.

church where the glory has departed. You've now become monument instead of movement.

[32 : 00] Get back to your first love. Verse seven records a final exhortation and a promise.

he who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

In each letter to the seven churches, the Lord issues this loving call to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying through these messages. This subtle shift from singular he to plural churches broadens the appeal of each message to all because the messages are representative and applicable to all of us.

Jesus' invitation to hear is more than simply taking in audible sounds. It means to heed, to apply, to accept.

It means to obey. He then gives this promise to anyone who will hear and heed his call.

[33 : 17] Lord, help me. He calls them the ones who conquer, which means to prevail after a struggle, to overcome.

Not just overcoming sin, but more specifically to this text, overcoming the coldness of heart, the spiritual indifference, the dispassionate service marked by leaving your first love.

Jesus promised this for those who are able to overcome and return, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Hallelujah. I thought you might be just a little bit more excited than that. This is good news, church. Let me tell you why.

This reference to the tree of life was eaten language, language from the garden of Eden. Back in Genesis chapter three, the first Adam was banished from the garden, lest he eats from the tree of life and lives forever in his fallen condition.

[34 : 24] But now the second Adam, Jesus Christ, will grant those who conquer permission to eat of this tree of life and live for all eternity in the paradise of God.

Paradise. Paradise. Paradise. The place where God lives, Lord help me, and you never have to leave.

Paradise, the place where sorrow, sickness, sadness, disease, and war are no more. Paradise, the place where Jesus told a repentant thief next to him on the cross, you'll be with me this very day.

Paradise. Eat of the tree in paradise. All you have to do, get back, get back, get back to your first love.

love. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, oh take and seal it with thy spirit from above.

[35 : 46] Church, let's all get back to our first love. let's pray together. Father, thank you for reminding us this morning that it's about you and our love for you.

No matter how busy we are doing church, if we don't love the God of the church, church, it's for not.

So God, please stir up again the gift on the inside of us. Renew that zeal and that passion for you.

Let us remember what it was like when we first found you and you first rescued us. let us never, ever, ever grow weary in loving you.

Let us never walk away from that love knowing that you loved us first, you loved us best, and all we can do is love you back.

[37 : 09] We give you thanks, glory, and honor in your son's name we pray. Amen.