

The Danger of Losing Our First Love
 Revelation 2:1-7
 July 5, 2020
 Newton Bible Church

The year was 1517. An obscure German Catholic priest had come through intense Bible study to an understanding of the Biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone. That year Martin Luther unleashed this doctrine upon a world ripe for reformation by stating it in a thesis and pinning it to the door of the Wittenberg church. That spark caught tinder and soon developed into a raging inferno.

The inferno kindled in Wittenberg spread across Europe, and numerous countries embraced the Reformation. Preachers went everywhere spreading the Reformation gospel. Large churches had standing room only crowds thronging to hear God's very Word in their own language. The inferno seemed unquenchable.

Yet if you go into those same buildings today (many of which still stand), you will find them abandoned or occupied by a mere handful of people. Abandoned because the raging inferno has dwindled to a few embers perilously close to extinction.

The question that begs to be answered is, "How could this happen?" The one factor that best explains how this happens was identified by the Lord Himself in a letter He personally dictated to the Apostle John. That letter was written to a first century church that was on a similar trajectory because it had lost its first love.

Before we dig into that letter, we need to dig into the background of the letter. Please turn to Revelation chapter 1:

Revelation 1:9-20 (ESV)

⁹I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those

that are to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

First, let's look at the addressees of the seven letters that follow in chapters 2 & 3:

- The addressees identified in verse 11 are the seven churches mentioned there and again at the heading of each of the individual letters.
- These churches were found on what was a postal route that started at Ephesus and ended at Laodicea.
- Not only were they historical churches, they were in a sense perennial churches that represent the types of churches and church problems that perennially exist throughout the church age.
- In all seven letters Christ took time to state what was commendable in that specific church. Two churches received only commendations, while the other five churches received both commendations and condemnations.
- In those churches receiving condemnations there appears to be a downward spiral from cooling faith to dead hypocrisy. That spiral is revealed step by step in the order of the letters, beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea.
- Our object of consideration this morning is the letter to the church at Ephesus, identifying where this downward spiral begins.

Having taken this quick look at the addressees of the letters, let's now consider the Addressor:

- This can be none other than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! John was allowed the privilege to observe the ministry of the glorified Christ in his church.
- This "One like a son of man" (the messianic title for Christ) is moving in the midst of the church. He is there not just to keep company but to empower (actively involved).
- He is clothed with a white robe and with a golden sash around His chest. This is the type of robe the High Priest wore, so it speaks of His priestly ministry (including interceding for us).
- The hairs of His head were white, like snow. The word used here is not a flat white but is a blazing white. It reveals His eternal glorious holiness as well as being a symbol of infinite wisdom.
- His eyes were like a flame of fire. Like laser beams, there is nothing His gaze cannot penetrate; He perceives correctly exactly what is happening in the church.
- His feet were like burnished bronze. The temple furnishings that were in any way used in a sin offering were always bronze. These glowing hot bronze feet are a picture of judgment of sin. Christ is moving through His church to exercise His chastening authority.
- His voice was like the roar of many waters. This is the voice of authority. He is the One who speaks to His church, through the Word and through his Spirit.
- He holds in His right hand the seven stars. This is evidence that He holds the leadership of the Church in His hand – He is in control of the church.
- Out of His mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword. This is not only a symbol of judgment but also a guarantee of protection.
- His face was like the sun shining in full strength. The Lord of glory is reflecting His glory through His church.

- Christ is actively observing and actively involved in His church! Though we do not see it with our physical eyes, the eyes of faith see Him constantly at work in His church.
- This leads us to His messages to the churches and specifically the message to the church at Ephesus. That is where we now turn:

Revelation 2:1-7 (ESV)

2 “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.

²“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. ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember 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. ⁶Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He 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. Christ’s commendation (vv. 2-3, 6) (to understand this commendation we must consider)
 - a. The church’s dramatic beginning
 - i. The dramatic setting:
 - Ephesus was the major city in this region. Pergamum was the official capitol of the province of Asia Minor but Ephesus was by far the greater city. A Roman writer called it “Luminasia” – the light of Asia.
 - Ephesus had the greatest harbor in Asia Minor, making it the major trade center and largest metropolis in the region. It was known as the marketplace of Asia and the gateway to Asia.
 - Politically it was a free city, given the right of self-government by the Roman empire.
 - The Ephesian Games conducted there rivaled the Olympic Games.
 - Ephesus was the center of the worship of Artemis whose Roman name was Diana. The temple dedicated to this goddess was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It also served as a sanctuary for criminals and as the bank of the Mediterranean (quite a bizarre combination!).
 - The worship of Diana included scores of eunuchs and thousands of priestesses who were nothing but prostitutes who believed their sexual exploits (including mutilation) would lift worshipers into the presence of the deities. About Ephesus Heraclitus wrote, “The morals of the temple were worse than the morals of animals, for even dogs do not mutilate each other.” He concluded, “The people are only fit to be drowned.”
 - Ephesus was a messy town with a messy centerpiece!
 - ii. The dramatic birth of the church:

- Acts 19 records that when Paul came to Ephesus, he found some disciples who had not received the Holy Spirit because they only knew about the baptism of John the Baptist. Paul explained about baptism in the name of Jesus; they were baptized and immediately received the Holy Spirit, and in a sense the church was born.
- Paul then spent three months speaking in the synagogue before unbelief caused him to withdraw and he began teaching daily in the hall of Tyrannus. That went on for two years during which time all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.
- Both the birth and development of this church were dramatic. Verse 11 informs us that “God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hand of Paul.” People came into Paul’s workshop and the lecture hall to purloin his handkerchiefs or aprons which were carried to those who were ill. When those cloths touched the ill, the ill were healed of their diseases and evil spirits left them.
- This became so well known that some Jewish exorcists began trying to cast out demons in Jesus’ name. Listen to what happened:

Acts 19:14-17 (ESV)

¹⁴Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” ¹⁶And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. ¹⁷And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.

- The dramatic development of this church was next evidenced by its effect upon the local economy. Verses 18-19 relate how believer’s newfound faith led them to give up occultic practices, to the point of burning the books that they had used in those practices. 50,000 pieces of silver went up in the smoke of that bonfire. Listen to what happened next:

Acts 19:23-30 (ESV)

²³About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way.²⁴For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. ²⁵These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. ²⁶And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.²⁷And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.”

²⁸When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s companions in travel. ³⁰But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him.

- This riot was a product of the gospel impacting the business of selling idols. This church truly had a remarkable beginning in a remarkable place! Next we notice:
 - b. The church’s remarkable leadership

- Even before the events recorded in Acts 19, we learn that Paul left two of his trusted associates in Ephesus:

Acts 18:18-21 (ESV)

¹⁸ After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchræe he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. ¹⁹ And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.

- The first influence in Ephesus was Paul's trusted associates Priscilla and Aquila. They probably planted the seeds for the church.
- Another influence is revealed in that same chapter.

Acts 18:24-25 (ESV)

²⁴ Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

- Priscilla and Aquila filled in the gaps for Apollos regarding the rest of the story of redemption. Apollos was recognized as the most powerful preacher of the gospel in that day. The disciples that Paul encountered at the beginning of chapter 19 were apparently people Apollos had instructed before he was enlightened by Priscilla and Aquila.
 - Paul taught there for three years, during which time his students fanned out over the entire area to plant churches in the different cities.
 - Paul's protégé Timothy served as pastor to this burgeoning church. Later it was served by Tychicus who was especially well-known to the Colossians.
 - The illustrious leadership of this remarkable church included the Apostle John. John was probably the leading elder at Ephesus when he was arrested by Domitian and exiled sixty miles away on the Isle of Patmos.
 - The greatest Christian leaders of that age had been involved in the development of this church. Next we notice:
- c. The church's effective teaching ministry
- Christ's commendations of this church reveal that the teaching ministry of the illustrious leaders had clearly been effective. If you simply consider these commendations, you would conclude that this was the model church. Christ identified the following results of an effective teaching ministry:
 - i. The first commendation regarded their works. Christ praised them for their *kopos*, labor to the point of sweat and exhaustion. This was toil that takes everything of mind and muscle that a person can put into it. They were the kind of workers every church leader loves to lead!
 - ii. The next commendation regarded their patient endurance (perseverance). Christ praised them for their *hupomone*. This is patient endurance, not a grim resignation but courageous gallantry which accepts hardship, suffering, loss, and turns it into grace and glory.
 - iii. The third commendation regarded their intolerance for sin. Christ praised them for their intolerance of those who are evil. Paul had instructed them in Ephesians 4:27

to “neither give place to the devil,” and they hadn’t. Paul also warned them in his last contact with the Ephesian elders to be on the alert for savage wolves. Forty years later, they are still hating evil and evil men.

- iv. The fourth commendation regarded their spiritual discernment. Christ praised them for testing and identifying those who were true and false apostles. Forty years after Paul’s admonition to be discerning they still knew how to evaluate a teacher and how to put him to the test. They were doctrinally correct and could sniff out false doctrine instantly!
 - v. The fifth commendation regarded their motivation. Christ praised them for enduring for the right reason, for His name’s sake. They were spiritual marathoners who had stayed the course for forty years. They had not grown weary because they were doing it all for Him, for His reputation.
 - vi. The sixth commendation regarded their hating what the Lord hates. Christ praised them for hating the works of the Nicolaitans which He also hated. Christ associated the teaching of the Nicolaitans in His letter to Pergamum with the teaching of Balaam. Balaam lured God’s people into idolatry by luring them into immorality. What you have with Nicolas in the New Testament appears to be the same as what you had with Balaam in the Old Testament. Clement of Alexander said, “They abandoned themselves to pleasure like goats, leading a life of self-indulgence.” Christ hated this and so did this church.
 - This was a hard-working church, toiling for the Kingdom, persevering through difficulty, unable to endure evil men, acting in behalf of righteousness, able to recognize false apostles. A church of commendable character! From all outward appearances there were no flaws in this remarkable church. Christ’s laser vision, however, had detected a flaw that would be fatal if left unattended.
2. Christ’s condemnation (vv. 4, 5B)
- a. Christ’s diagnosis of their spiritual condition:
 - Christ’s penetrating spiritual laser vision found a fatal flaw that probably no one else had seen. He confronted them with the painful truth that they had abandoned the love that they had at first.
 - We would say that they lost their first love. But that’s not what Christ said. He used the word *afihmi*, which literally means to leave, forsake, depart. It also means to send away; used of a husband divorcing his wife. It is the same word Jesus used to describe divorce when asked about who was allowed to divorce their wife.
 - J. Hampton Keathley observed, “It stresses an act for which one is personally responsible. This is not lost love but left love and suggests three particular problems: (a) they had moved away from their original position of devotion and fervor for the Savior by a gradual departure; (b) they had come to put service for the Lord ahead of love, devotion, and fellowship with Him; (c) their labor gradually came to be merely mechanical, the thing they were responsible to do, but the Savior wants it to be the result of the abiding life, the result of an intimate walk with Him through the Spirit.”
 - The church is truly espoused to Christ but there is always the danger of that first love growing cold. Like Martha, we can become so busy working for Christ that we have no time to love Him.

- This is far more serious than we are prone to believe. Christ is more concerned about what we do with Him than for Him. He knows that labor is no substitute for love. To the public the Ephesian church was highly successful; to Christ, it had fallen.
- They were doing what they always did. But the honeymoon was over. Like a marriage can become, faithfulness was there, and duty was there, and responsibility was there, but the passion was gone.
- No great scandal had taken place, there had been no great organizational blunder, there was no loss of resources financial or human, but the heart was cold.
- Christ correctly labels this as abandonment because it begins with choosing something other than Him as the object of love. Jeremiah diagnosed the same spiritual malaise in the children of Israel:

Jeremiah 2:13 (ESV)

¹³for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

- The obvious question to ask is, “How does the church get like that?” The answer is amazingly simple; a church gets like that when enough of its people get like that. When love is exchanged for duty by enough members of the church the church as a whole begins to cool. If the pattern is not broken it will abandon its first love. This is serious business!
- b. Christ’s warning if that condition remains unchanged:
- Christ’s warning is unambiguous and direct. The church will be extinguished, and it will be extinguished by His very own hand!
 - Having stated the cure to this spiritual malaise in the beginning of verse 5, Christ declared that if they failed to heed His command, He would come and remove their lampstand. To paraphrase, Christ said that if they did not follow His prescription and return to passionate love for Him, He would personally come to put them out of business.
 - Sadly, that’s exactly what happened. You can visit the ruins of Ephesus today, but there is no city there and certainly no church. Instead, the region has been taken over by Islam and secularism.
 - Love for Christ that has cooled is a dangerous condition. It is the forerunner of spiritual apathy. Apathy leads to spiritual compromise and love not for Christ but for something or someone else.
 - When the heart of a church grows cold, that church is in danger. When a person’s heart grows cold it is just as dangerous!
 - We have concentrated upon the danger that can capture even the best of us this morning and will focus upon the cure next Sunday morning, but we need to quickly identify that cure:
3. Christ’s prescription (v. 5a) (we will consider this in-depth next week)
- a. Remember!
- Christ’s specific words are “remember therefore from where you have fallen.”
 - This is more than just remembering the initial passion of your love for Christ. This theme runs through Scripture and highlights the reality of our forgetfulness. Israel as a nation

was commanded time and time again to remember God and all that He had done for them.

- At the very least it means to go back and remember the glorious experience that was yours when you came to Christ. It includes that and much more that we will consider next week.

b. Repent!

- There is a need to repent because to have abandoned our first love is to have fallen into sin, and sin must be confessed and repented of.
- It includes repenting of our lack of love – failure to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. It includes repenting of any cold, mechanical service to Christ.
- Because repentance itself is a gift from God administered by the Holy Spirit, it means to confess, ask forgiveness and plead for this gift.

c. Repeat!

- The third element in Christ's prescription is to go back and do the works you did at first.
- Think about the excitement you felt in reading His Word. Think about how anxious you were to tell Him everything you were concerned about in prayer. Think about how excited you were to get together with other believers. Think about how you could hardly wait to sit under the instruction of His Word.
- Repeat the things you did when love was glowing hot. But don't try to take this prescription out of order. Follow it exactly. Remember how it was, repent before God, and repeat the things you used to do.

We have taken significant time this morning to think through how dangerous it is to move away from our first love for Christ, either as a church or as individuals. We have seen that this happened in a church that appeared to be the model church. If it could happen to them, it can happen to us! While it was obviously not a willful rejection of Christ, it was based in choices individuals made to value other things above fellowship with Christ Himself. I too often have made similar choices. My prayer is that we will all heed this warning, at the very least asking the Lord, "Is it I?" May we heed the warning and determine to apply the Lord's prescription in our lives, individually and corporately.

Prayer