

## THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS, REVELATION 2:1-7

Let's turn in our Bibles, please, to the book of Revelation, chapter 2. We want to read together Revelation chapter 2, verses 1 through 7.

“<sup>1</sup> Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; <sup>2</sup> I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: <sup>3</sup> and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. <sup>4</sup> Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. <sup>5</sup> Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. <sup>6</sup> But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup> He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

We come now today to the second chapter of the book of Revelation, which begins the seven letters of Christ to the seven churches of Asia. We must never forget that the book of Revelation is a church epistle. That is, it's a letter written to these seven local churches, and by extension, to every local church that will exist after them. This book is Christ's letter to Sovereign Grace Bible Church.

The concern of Christ, as we can see from these opening chapters of this book, is with His church. And the goal of Christ is to encourage and strengthen and purify and comfort and challenge His churches. These churches are engaged in intense spiritual warfare, and if they are to triumph and if they are to overcome *in* that warfare, then they must heed the message Christ has for them in these letters.

These letters tell us what Christ thinks of His churches, and these letters tell us what Christ expects from His churches. We know that Christ loves His church, and we know that Christ gave Himself for His church and that He did that on the cross. And therefore, He cannot be indifferent towards the church or unconcerned with it. If Jesus loved the church to the point He laid down His life for the church, then He cannot possibly be indifferent toward the church now. And that is why no Christian is ever indifferent toward the church.

The church, we are told in the Scriptures, is Christ's body; the church, we are told in the Scriptures, is Christ's bride; the church, we are told in the Scriptures, is Christ's temple; and the church, we are told in the Scriptures, is Christ's kingdom. So we see this terminology that the Bible uses to describe the church in relationship to Christ—it is His body, it is His bride, it is His temple, and it is His kingdom. Do you suppose that Jesus is concerned with His own body? Is He concerned with His own bride? Is He concerned with the temple in which He dwells? Is He concerned with the kingdom over which He rules? Well if that's the case, then Christ has the

most intense focused concern with our church that is conceivable. The church is at the center of Christ's heart, and the church is the entire focus of Christ's affection.

Now knowing that Christ has this intense focus and concern and affection for His church should cause us then to listen very carefully to what Christ has to say to us. And it should cause us to respond gladly to the directions that Christ gives to us. These letters are, if you will, love letters. These letters express Christ's love to His church. It is clear that these letters are an extension and an outflow of Christ's heart to His people.

These letters are also an extension and an outflow of John's vision of the Lord Jesus Christ in chapter 1. We have to understand chapters 2 and 3 in the context of chapter 1. And what did we see in chapter 1? We saw this glorious revelation of the person of Jesus Christ, and it is that person of chapter 1, who is saying the things of chapters 2 and 3.

In each of these seven letters, Christ identifies Himself to each church by some characteristic that was revealed about Christ in John's vision in chapter 1. The particular aspect of Christ that is selected by Christ to identify Himself by to each individual church is that aspect of Christ that is particularly suited to address the unique needs of that church. So in each letter He says, "Unto the angel of the church of," and then whatever church it is, "write, These things saith he that..."—and then He identifies Himself by one or more of the attributes that were revealed about Him in chapter 1. And we're going to see that as we expound each letter in turn.

Now each of these letters follows a similar pattern or structure. There is a sevenfold dimension to each of these seven letters. First of all, there's an address to the pastor of each church. So it opens with, These things write unto the angel, the messenger, of Ephesus or Smyrna or Pergamos, etc. Of course, the Greek word "angelos" is translated "messenger," that's what it means, and the Greek word "angelos" or angel is oftentimes used of humans.

John the Baptist was Jesus Christ's "angel"—that's the word that's used in the original. He says, My messenger shall go before my face, my angel, and that was John the Baptist. And then John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus and said, Are you the Messiah that's supposed to come, or are we supposed to look for somebody else? John sent his "angels," it says in the original language, to Jesus. So we see in Matthew 11, verse 10, in Mark 1, verse 2, and in Luke 7:24, the word "angelos" or angel in the original language being used of human messengers. As we said last time, these seven stars that are in the hand of Jesus are the seven angels of the churches; that is, they are the messengers, they are the pastors, they're the ones who bring the message of Christ to the churches. So then this is the first aspect of each letter. There is an address to the pastor of each church.

Secondly, there's a description of Christ in each letter. It then goes on to say, "These things saith he that..." and then He describes Himself. He describes Himself as He that has the seven stars and walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, in His letter to the Ephesians. In His letter to Smyrna, He identifies Himself as the first and the last, the one who was dead and is now

alive. In the letter to Pergamos, He identifies Himself as the one who has the sharp sword with two edges. In the letter to Thyatira, He identifies Himself as the one who has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like fine brass. To the church at Sardis, He identifies Himself as the one who has the seven Spirits and the seven stars. To the church at Philadelphia, He identifies Himself as the one who has the key. And then of course, to the church at Laodicea, the one who is the faithful witness. All of those descriptors are taken directly out of chapter 1.

So Jesus identifies Himself to these various churches, employing various truths about Himself that were revealed in chapter 1. We have, then, an address to the pastor of each church; we have a description of Christ in each letter; thirdly, there is a commendation of their good works and character. Jesus finds something to praise about every single one of these churches, with the exception of Laodicea. He speaks of their charity, their faith, their labor, their patience, their faithfulness, their rejection of false teachers, and various other virtues that they possess. So Jesus looks at His churches and He says, You know, there's some really good things in this church. And He identifies them and He expresses approval and gratitude for them, with the exception of the church at Laodicea, where He says not one good thing about that church.

Fourthly, each letter has a correction of their sins and their defects. He condemns their failure to obey and criticizes their departure from godliness and truth in various areas. He condemns things like tolerating false doctrine and false teachers, immoral behavior, worldliness and materialism, loss of love for Christ. It's interesting that there are two churches He does not criticize. He has no criticism for the church at Smyrna and He has no criticism for the church at Philadelphia. Smyrna was a suffering church; they were suffering martyrdom. And the church at Philadelphia was a weak church, and we're going to look at what that weakness consisted of when we get there. But the point is, the churches that were, as it were, the least, are the ones for which He had no criticism.

So people say, Well, your church isn't perfect. Well, the question is, what does Christ think of the church? And for some churches, He says, I don't have anything bad to say about them. Other churches, He says, I don't have one good thing to say about that church. Other churches, He says, You know, they're a mixed bag. There's some really good things here, but there's some things that are seriously wrong as well. So we see the variety here. Churches are not homogeneous, even within the same denomination or affiliation. And therefore, it is imperative for us as a church to ask ourselves, as we look at these churches, What is being said about these churches that is true of us, both good and bad?

Fifthly, He issues to each church a warning. These warnings are mainly calls to repent for their sins that He has identified and to reform their behavior. That's true with five of the seven churches. He identifies things that are wrong, and He says, You guys need to repent of those wrong things. Then there are two churches for which He has no criticisms, and therefore no rebukes. But nevertheless, He still issues warnings to them. He says, Just because I don't have anything negative to say about you doesn't mean that you can coast or that you don't need to be careful. He says to them that they need to be diligent to remain faithful, even to the point of

death. He says, You need to be diligent and remember and keep holding fast so you don't fall away. Just because a church has nothing in particular wrong with it, and it has a lot of things that are right with it, doesn't mean that therefore it's locked into that virtue forever. It can fall away down the road, too.

So we have to watch and pray, lest we enter into temptation. We may not have fallen into it yet, but we certainly can, and so we always need to be watching and praying. Every church has work to do, Jesus is saying, either by way of repentance of what is wrong, or by way of reinforcement of what is right. Every church is warned to either repent or to reinforce.

Sixthly, each of these letters has an exhortation to hear and to heed what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Every letter has this phrase within it, He that has an ear to hear, let him hear. What He is saying is, Pay attention! Ponder and penetrate down to the true meaning and application of these things. In other words, Jesus is not just talking so that we can let this all go in one ear and out the other. He's saying, I'm not just wasting my time or yours. When I say this stuff, you need to carefully listen. You need to thoughtfully consider. And you need to diligently apply what I'm telling you. Don't just let this pass by.

Seventh, every letter has a promise of comfort and consolation to the overcomer. To those who overcome, that is, those who persevere in faithfulness to Christ in the midst of a persecuting world, wonderful things are promised—things like the opportunity to eat of the tree of life, to have a crown of life, to escape the second death, to have power over the nations, to sit with Christ in His throne. These and many other promises are given to those who do have an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

These, then, are the seven elements of these letters. There is an address to the pastor of each church; there is a description of Christ; there is a commendation of their good works and character; there is a correction of their sins and defects; there is a warning given; there is an exhortation to hear and heed what the Spirit is saying to the churches; and there is a promise of comfort and consolation.

Now what we see as we survey these seven letters to these seven churches is that not one of them is without severe struggles and challenges. Not one of these churches is on easystreet. Not one of these churches is on autopilot. Five of the seven churches have serious sins to repent of. One of them is experiencing martyrdom. Another of them is very weak. The rest of them have either false teachers, or spiritual deadness, or spiritual indifference, or coldheartedness, or materialism. Every church out of the seven—every one of them—is severely tested and severely tried in the crucible of spiritual warfare that they are engaged in.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that our own church has gone through great conflicts and great difficulties and great pressures to compromise the truth and the will of Christ. We as a church have had to do battle with the world's seduction and we have had to do battle with the

world's persecutions, just like these churches did. We have struggled with sins within our midst. We have suffered persecution.

The things that these letters declare characterize these seven churches are the things that characterize the churches in every age and in every land. What we see in these seven letters, we see reflected right in our own assembly and in its history. And it also tells us what we may expect in our future.

Now we need to understand that these seven letters are not a chronology of church history, but rather, they are a chronicle of church struggles throughout history as the churches have battled the wiles of the Devil and his helpers. There is the theory, which I addressed earlier in my introduction to the book, that each of these seven churches represent a period of church history. That is simply a fantasy.

These seven churches do not represent seven successive ages of church history, but rather what they represent is the kind of struggles that exist in every age, among all of the churches, throughout history. So there are churches like the church at Ephesus today, and there are churches like the church at Smyrna today, and there are churches like the church at Pergamos today. What each of these churches are, we can find represented among churches in our own day, and indeed, in every period of history.

Well, these introductory thoughts on the seven letters to these seven churches now bring us to the consideration of the first of those letters, and that is Christ's letter to the Ephesians. We want to expound then today Revelation chapter 2, verses 1 through 7. Notice in the first place this morning, the introduction to the letter.

The introduction to this letter is in verse 1, which says, "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks." Each of these letters is introduced by a statement about who the recipient of the letter is, and by a statement as to who the author of the letter is.

Notice first, in the introduction to the letter, that the recipient of this letter is the pastor and the church at Ephesus. We don't know who the pastor of the church was at this point in time, but we do know that Ephesus was a wealthy and prosperous city of about a quarter of a million people—about 250,000 people. It was a seaport city, it was a great center of commerce and trade, and it was most noted for the great temple of Diana, which was one of the seven wonders of the world at that time in history.

Paul established the church at Ephesus, as recorded in Acts chapter 18, Acts chapter 19, and he gave it its final exhortation in Acts chapter 20. All of this took place somewhere around 52 AD, when he began the church. He actually ministered there for a couple of years as its local pastor. The work at Ephesus was so successful that the worship in the temple of Diana fell off sharply,

and all they that dwelt in Asia, we are told, heard the word of the Lord Jesus. So from Ephesus, the gospel just massively went out into the surrounding regions and areas and towns.

However, it is now 40 years later as John writes this letter to the Ephesians, and during this time, their love for the truth and their defense of the truth had not lessened one iota. Amazing. But their love for Christ and for one another and for the lost had diminished greatly, and therein lay the problem. These, then are the recipients of the letter.

The author of the letter is Christ, who designates Himself in verse 1 as the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand and who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. We saw that these seven stars represent the pastors of the churches, who are Christ's true messengers. These seven stars are commissioned by Christ, and they are illuminated by Christ, and they are taught by Christ, and they stand opposed to the false apostles and the false teachers who were assaulting the churches, and this church in particular. What Christ is doing by identifying Himself as the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand is encouraging the true pastors at Ephesus that He is protecting them and upholding them and strengthening them in the face of these false apostles who are seeking to assault and to undermine them. Christ identifies Himself as the one who holds the pastors of the church in His right hand.

To know that Christ holds His true ministers in His right hand is a great comfort and encouragement, both to the pastors themselves as well as to the congregations that they serve. I mean, I have a great concern that Christ upholds me, but I think you also have a great concern that Christ upholds me, because you recognize that as the pastor goes, so goes the church. Therefore, you can be as thankful that I'm held in the right hand of Christ as I am. Because of that, we both have confidence that going into the future, Christ is going to preserve His truth in this assembly.

But Christ is not only the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand. He further identifies Himself as the one who walks in the midst of the golden candlesticks, verse 1. We saw that these golden candlesticks represent the churches. What Christ is saying by identifying Himself with this language and this imagery is that Christ is active in His church and in His churches. He walks among them; that is, He lives in the midst of each one, observing all that goes on in them, ministering to them, receiving worship from them, and directing and guiding them.

The point is, the church is not alone. Christ is with her, He is in the midst of her, and He is filling her with His power and with His presence. Each local church is under His constant oversight. Christ is present where two or three are gathered together in His name, in the very midst of His churches, showing that He is intimately concerned with them and that He personally cares for them.

This, then, is the introduction to the letter. We have seen the recipients are the pastor and the church at Ephesus. We have seen that the author is Christ, who cares for the pastors of the churches and who lives in the midst of the churches. He walks among us.

That brings us to our second major point this morning. Having seen the introduction to the letter, notice secondly, the message of the letter. The message of the letter consists of three things: His commendation, His condemnation, and His warning.

First of all, His commendation. This is in verses 2 and 3, and verse 6. I'll just read them to you. Here's the commendation, verse 2: "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: <sup>3</sup> and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted." Now verse 6: "But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." So verses 2, 3, and 6 comprise the commendation that Christ gives to this church at Ephesus.

Notice what He starts out with in verse 2. He says, "I know." Now these words, "I know" precede each message to each church. Christ *knows* what each church is experiencing. He knows their virtues and He knows their weaknesses, and what He is saying here is that He is intimately acquainted with every detail of their life. He knows their works. There is no hiding what they have done, either good or bad. He is fully aware of all that they face and experience and accomplish. And so He says, I know.

Christ knows this church better than any one of us knows it, because there's stuff going on in this church I don't know about, but He does. And there's stuff going on in my life that you don't know about, but He does. He knows the truth about the whole thing.

Now regarding what He knows, He says, I know your works; that is, the deeds that you have undertaken to accomplish. He says, And I know your labor; that is, the intense effort that went into the accomplishment of those deeds, even in the face of grievous opposition. And He says, Not only do I know your works, which you undertook to do; not only do I know your labor, the intensity of effort that you put into it; He also says, I know your patience, that is, the steadfastness over the long periods of time in engaging in intense effort in the works that you have done. They had been steadfast over long periods of time, even when few results seemed to appear from their efforts.

Then He says, Not only do I know your works, but He says, I also know how you cannot bear them which are evil. That is, not only did you work hard for me with intense effort over a long period of time, even if there were few results, you just kept on doing it. When evil people came into the congregation, you didn't say, O! we're building the numbers! He said, You ran them out. You couldn't bear those which were evil, those who defend their moral impurity. You did not tolerate such people. The Ephesian church did not tolerate moral corruption in its midst.

Now we welcome morally corrupt people to come. We welcome morally corrupt people to hear the gospel. We welcome morally corrupt people who struggle with their sin and despise it and are seeking deliverance from it. But we do not welcome people who come in their sin and who

glory in it and who defend it and who seek to justify it before all, and thereby involve others in its practice. That's what you don't put up with for one second. And they didn't.

It says further in verse 2, that they tried them which said they were apostles but were not, and found them to be liars. These people who were claiming to be Apostles were claiming to be apostles in the sense of little "a" apostles. It's not like they were coming along saying, I was one of the twelve. Everybody knew exactly who the twelve were. But they were coming along claiming to be the leading teachers among the churches—you know, the bigshots, the Joel Olsteens of the day; the high profile, widely known, broadly promoted teachers of the Bible.

He says, You put to the test those who claim to be leading teachers in the church. You put to the test those who claim to have special power and anointing from Jesus Christ. Their teaching was examined in the light of Scripture, and it was exposed as being false. And the Ephesians did not mince any words, they publicly said, These men are liars. They are lying when they say that this is the truth of God and that is the truth of God. They did not mince any words. They called a spade a spade, and they called a liar a liar, and they called a heretic a heretic, and they called the wicked man a wicked man, and Christ approves of the use of this label and commends them for using it. If someone's a liar, then you need to publicly say, They're a liar.

I've been criticized in the past, even had people leave the church over the fact that I named and identified the heretics of our day, exposed their false teaching, and expressed rejection towards them. I had one guy say, Well, you know, when you're pointing a finger at somebody, you've got three fingers pointing right back at you—as though that's some profound spiritual insight. The Bible has no problem with saying things like, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: <sup>15</sup> of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words." (2 Tim.4:14-15) Paul named him, called him out, said who they were and what they were. And Jesus is saying, You found these people liars because liars is what they are.

They didn't say, Well, you know, that's the kind of Christianity they follow, and I follow this kind over here. We just need to be broadminded and latitudinarian, and we need to just have the big tent and embrace all that claim to be Christians. No, if they're teaching a false gospel, they're liars. They're not of us. They're not in the kingdom. So they're servants of Satan, because Satan is—who?—a liar from the beginning. And we need to understand false teachers are not harmless people who are just misguided. These are people who are active in the service of Satan, spreading a false gospel in order to damn people to hell and turn them away from Christ.

So we see that these Ephesian elders heeded Paul's warning. You remember in Acts chapter 20, in verses 28 through 31, when Paul was giving his final charge to the Ephesian elders before he went to his ultimate captivity and death in Jerusalem, he said to them, "<sup>28</sup> Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> Also of



your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

<sup>31</sup> Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”

So in Acts chapter 20, verses 28 to 31, Paul in his final admonition to the Ephesian elders back in AD 50s, maybe 54 or 55, said, Take heed. Here we are 40 years later, and they are still taking heed. They are protecting the flock from false teachers from without and from within, and they are working really hard against great opposition with tremendous patience in marking out and identifying these evil men who would promote immorality in the congregation, and these lying men who would promote false theology in the congregation, and they have stood like a brick wall, a stone wall, against these men, both in their immoral behavior and in their unbiblical teaching. And they said to them on the one hand, You are evil; and on the other hand, they said, You are liars. And they kept the congregation morally and theologically pure. These were good men. Would to God we had many more like them.

Then He says, furthermore, in Revelation 2, verse 3, I know thou “hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast labored, and hast not fainted.” This word “borne” means they carried the burden of the battle for the truth. They did the heavy lifting and the hard work of defending the truth.

And then he says, You had patience. This is the second time He commends them for their patience. He commended them in verse 2: “I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience,” and now in verse 3, He says, You have borne and have had patience—exact same Greek word. So the second time He commends them for the steadfastness and the endurance that they had in the battle for truth without wavering.

Then He says, You had pure motives. He says, For my name’s sake you have labored.” Now this “labor” is a verbal form of the noun form in verse 2. “I know thy works, and thy labor.” Verse 3, thou “hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast labored.” And you didn’t faint.

So this rejection of moral pollution and corruption, and this rejection of theological pollution and corruption that tried to assault the church and enter the church and that was so successfully resisted and driven out of the church, He said, You did that for my name’s sake. It was not out of stubbornness or selfglorification or a “my-way-or-the-highway” mentality that was driving these men. Rather, their motive was the glory of Christ and the honor of His name and the upholding of his truth. It was these things, for the sake of the name of Christ, that motivated them to work so hard for so long in the face of so much opposition to uphold the truth. The honor of Christ’s name and the honor of Christ’s truth is what kept them going and kept them from fainting and giving up the battle for the truth and for doctrinal purity.

In a word, they earnestly contended for the faith that was once delivered to the saints, and they did not quit or faint or give up or give over or say, This is too hard! We’ll just compromise the

truth a little here and little there and a little over here, and we'll keep some people happy. They wouldn't do it. The point is, I hope you see by now, that fighting for moral purity in the church and fighting for doctrinal purity in the church is hard. The language he uses here of laboring and of patience and of bearing of burdens and not fainting—this is language of very exhausting work.

Moving on to verse 6, he says, “But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” God is a hater whose people need to be haters as well. And in this case, the hatred is directed towards the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

Now the question is, Who are the Nicolaitans? The answer is, the Nicolaitans apparently were an early Gnostic sect who evidently advocated sinful license in the name of Christian liberty; or they advocated sinful license on the ground that spiritual perfection could not be impaired by sensual indulgence. In other words, to simplify it, they said that what you did with your body had no impact on your soul, because Gnostics saw the material as being completely separate and entirely irrelevant to the spiritual. So Gnostics had this dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, this dualism, such that the material was viewed as wholly evil and entirely irrelevant, and the spiritual as wholly good and entirely separate. Therefore, you could fornicate all you wanted with your body and still be holy and pure in your soul. God hates such teaching. And the Ephesian Christians hated it as well, and they fought hard against it and would not tolerate those who taught it.

Now you have to understand, this was the city of Ephesus where the temple of Diana was, and this was a fertility cult, and the temple was filled with prostitutes. The way you would worship was to go and have intimate relations with the prostitutes before Diana, and thus provoke her to her fertility activities in bringing rain and crops and all the abundance of the earth. So you have people showing up to church on Sunday being all holy, and then the Nicolaitans were teaching them you can go to the temple on Monday and participate with the prostitutes, because what you do with your body doesn't have any impact on your soul.

The teaching today looks like this. You know, you can be a homosexual and a good Christian at the same time. You can live together without being married and be good Christians. God hates that teaching. God will have no sexual impurity in His churches. He hates it. He doesn't hate sex. He thinks that's great. He invented it. He commanded it to be engaged in. He provided the venue for it when He created the institution of marriage and brought man and woman together and said, Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth. Outside of that parameter, it is immoral and is to be avoided.

The church at Ephesus was morally pure and the church at Ephesus was doctrinally pure. Now we would think that this was a great church. But Jesus said, Something is missing here. Your doctrine and practice is as straight as a gun barrel, but unfortunately, it's just as empty. That brings us to our second major point under the message of the letter: 1a was the introduction to the letter; 2a, the message of the letter; 1b, His commendation, which we just discussed; now 2b, His condemnation.

His condemnation is in verses 4 and 5. Notice verse 4, “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.” Notice then first of all under the condemnation, the charges made. The charges made are in verse 4, and the charge is they have left their first love. They had focused on the truth of Christ, but they had forgotten the Christ of the truth. I’ll repeat that. They had focused on the truth of Christ, but they had forgotten the Christ of the truth. They had become more concerned with the doctrine than with the Christ that the doctrine revealed and defined.

You recall that Jude told those to whom he was writing, in Jude chapter 1, verse 21, that they were to “keep [themselves] in the love of God.” That is, they were to keep themselves in a state of warmhearted love toward God. Jude was telling them, Keep on loving God with all of your heart and mind and soul and strength. This is what the Ephesians were failing to do. They were so concerned with moral purity and with doctrinal purity that they had forgotten why they must be morally pure and doctrinally pure. Yes, they were doing it for His name’s sake, but He almost became an abstraction and a footnote to what they were giving the focus of their attention to, which was fighting this tremendous battle for moral and doctrinal purity in an age where immorality and lies were utterly rampant and constantly assaulting them.

So He says to them, You’ve forgotten to love *me*. Your love for me has grown cold. All of your focus and your efforts and your energy are horizontal, and to the extent that you are focused horizontally, you are doing fantastic; but the vertical dimension of your church is missing. You’re so focused on people and what they’re doing and what they’re teaching that you have forgotten to focus on Christ and who He is and what He has done.

He says to them, I have somewhat against thee, because you have left your first love. Verse 5: “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works.” In other words, Remember how you used to love Jesus when you were first saved? He says, Go back to that degree of focus and intensity and attachment and affection. Stir up your love for me.

Now how do we go about doing that? I know that you struggle because I struggle with keeping up warmheartedness towards the Lord Jesus in the midst of all the struggles and the battles that we have to fight. Loving God does not just come automatically to the soul of even the most experienced believer. You know what? Loving God is something you’ve got to work at doing.

It’s just like you have to stir up and work at maintaining your love for your husband or wife. Remember when you first met? All this infatuation, all this excitement, just being in their presence you just felt electrified, right? Then a few years pass after marriage, and it’s like, Nyah. What do you have to do? You know, you have to start dating that person again. You have to start working up romance and love for that person, and you have to do that all of your lives. When the infatuation phase is over, the work of constantly renewing love begins. It’s not automatic; you have to plan for it, you have to work on it, and you have to keep stirring it up all the days of your life. Well what’s true with your spouse is also true with Christ.

So let me offer you some suggestions as to how you can stir up that coldheartedness and transform it into warmheartedness towards the Lord Jesus Christ. First of all, meditate on the love that Christ has for you, and when you do, your love for Him will grow.

It says in First John 4 and verse 19, “We love him, because he first loved us.” So if you’re not loving Him very much, it’s because you’re not thinking like you should about how much He loves you. You know, one of the things that really makes me love my wife is to think about all the ways she has done me good. And as I think about it—she did this and she did that, and she is this and she is that—it makes me love her. But if I forget about those things and never think about them, the love isn’t stirred up.

In the same way, when we think about all that Jesus has done for us, then it makes us love Him. It says, God who is rich in mercy for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, made us alive together with Christ; raised us up together, seated us in the heavenlies. In the ages to come, He’s going to show us the riches of His grace (Eph. 2:47). And when you think about all that He has done for us in saving us, and all He’s doing now, and all He’s going to do, that makes you love Him. “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God” (1 John 3:1).

So we think about His love for us: He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. And if thinking of His love to you doesn’t stir up your love to Him, nothing will. But see, we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about what God has done for us, we’re so busy fighting our battles down here. We need to focus on what He’s already done for us up there.

Secondly, we can increase our love for Christ by rejecting and hating all sin. It says in Matthew 24:12, that “because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.” Love for Christ and participation in sin are mutually exclusive. The more you sin, the less you love Jesus. And the more you love Jesus, the less you sin. The Bible says, If any man loves the world, the love of the Father isn’t in Him. Those things don’t dwell together. So either love for Christ will drive you away from sin, or love for sin will drive you away from love for Christ. Sin destroys love. As love for sin grows, love for God diminishes.

Thirdly, not only do we need to meditate on the love of Christ for us, not only do we need to reject and hate sin, but we need to reflect on the love Christ has for us, in particular, in the laying down of His life for us. In other words, focus on the cross. John 15:13, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” In Second Corinthians 5 and verse 14, it says, “For the love of Christ constraineth [controls] us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead:<sup>15</sup> and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.”

The Bible doesn’t just point us to the works of God that He has done for us in general as a reason why we should love Him; it specifically points us to the cross in particular as to the reason why

we should love Him. Do we love God because He first loved us by creating us, and putting us in this wonderful world, and providing us with all the material comforts and blessings we have, in giving us friends and family, giving us a beautiful place in which to live? Yes. But we love Him even more as we focus on what He did on the cross.

So as we sing hymns about Christ and His sacrifice for us; as we read books about Christ and His redemption of us; as we read, in particular, the gospels, over and over and over again, these things provoke the love of God. You know how the Bible says faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God? I'm going to say this: Love comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Now I can't cite a chapter and verse for that, but all I know is that as I read my Bible, I find my heart warming towards God. And if I don't read my Bible for several days on end, I find myself growing cold in my love towards God. The more I think about Jesus saving me from my sins, the more I love Him.

Fourthly, pray and ask the Spirit to increase your love for God. When we read in Galatians 5:22 about the fruit of the Spirit, what's the first fruit? Love. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and it goes on. Well if the fruit of the Spirit is love, then ask the Spirit to work that fruit in you. You pray and you lament over your coldheartedness towards Christ, and you say, Oh, Lord! Work love for Jesus in me. And then of course, apply yourself to the means. Read about Christ. Repent of your sins. Reflect on the love of God for you. And that's how the Spirit works the fruit in your life. Now you can do all those things, but if the Spirit isn't working, not much is going to happen. And that's why it's imperative that we not grieve the Spirit and quench the Spirit, but look to Him to work His grace in us.

Then fifthly, keep company with those who love God. Hebrews 10:24 says, "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works." You know, when I'm around people who love God, it helps me love God. When I'm around people who are in love with Jesus and it just flows out of them, man, it makes me love Jesus too!

Sixthly, attend the Lord's Supper. You can increase your love for Jesus by attending the Lord's Supper. Here our love for Him is enflamed as we remember His past work of saving us from our sins, His present work of preserving us in grace, and His future work when He comes again and will glorify us and deliver us from sin forever. The Lord's Supper is a place where our love for the Lord is renewed and refreshed and reignited.

Seventh, we can increase our love for Christ by loving our brethren. Matthew 25 and verse 40 says, Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. So when I love you and you love me, we are just loving Jesus. And you know, as you engage in acts of love, the feelings of love follow, don't they? If you find yourself not really very warmhearted towards your wife or your husband, just go *do* something for them. You know what they like, just do it. In the doing of it, the feelings follow. Love to Christ and love for our brethren are inseparable.

This, then, is the condemnation. The charges made are, You have grown cold in your love towards me. And I've given you seven things that will help you. Heed this warning to remember from whence you were fallen and repent and do the first works. If you do those seven things, it will reignite your love for the Lord Jesus and enable you to do those first works of affection that you had toward Him before you got so wrapped up in the battle and the blood and the warfare and the struggle for moral purity and doctrinal purity, that you began to forget the person who you were doing it for.

You know, it's like when you go to work and it's miserable and it's hard, you've got nasty customers to deal with, you've got an obnoxious boss, and you've got all these coworkers. It's like, Why am I doing this? Oh—I'm doing it for her. Yes. And that makes it all worthwhile. Why do we strive for moral purity in the church? Why do strive for doctrinal purity in the church? Oh—It's for Him. It's for Him. And if we ever let the "Him" diminish, and just get involved with the activities, then we run into the danger of dead orthodoxy.

So He makes the charge, He gives this warning. He says in verse 5, Remember how you used to have a warm affection for Christ. Repent. Turn away from this coldheartedness. Do the first works, express love to Christ like you used to, as you follow those seven principles, he says—Or else. The charges made—verse 4; here's the warning given, verse 5b: "or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of its place, [unless you] repent."

Now we know what the candlestick is, right? It represents the church, because the church is supposed to be the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your God which is in heaven. Shine in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, He says, holding forth the word of life. By the way we live and by the way we teach, we are lightshedders.

So what Jesus is saying is, Look. If the core of your life and the core of your church is not the love for Jesus Christ, then you've ceased to shed light. No matter how morally pure you are, no matter how doctrinally straight you are, if people walk in that door and don't see Jesus Christ, they don't see love for Him, then you're really not shedding any light, and you're pretty useless. A tree that doesn't bear fruit gets chopped down and tossed. And a church that does not have at its forefront a love for Christ is a church that has ceased to be a lightbearing, lightshedding church. What He's saying is, Your witness will be extinguished. The church will cease to exist.

Sound doctrine without a sincere love for Christ is an empty intellectualism and a dead orthodoxy and a useless witness. What good is doctrine if it doesn't lead us to love Christ? And without loving Christ and His people, all we have is a vain formalism. All we have is a dead orthodoxy. Doing the work of God, upholding the truth of God, maintaining the morality of God while devoid of a loving affection for God is like a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal—much noise about nothing. And if I understand all mysteries and have all knowledge and have not love, what? I'm nothing. So we have to speak the truth, yes. But we better speak it in love, or it's worthless.

Love is not a mushy sentimentalism that pats wicked people on the back and says, I just want to affirm you, brother. But it is a meekness, it's a gentleness, it's a kindness, it's a sweetness that says, You know, I love you too much to let you go on like that. You see, when you love people like that, they get it. They get it.

Well that leads us then to our third and final point, very briefly. Having seen the introduction to the letter in verse 1; having seen the message of the letter in verses 2 to 6; now finally we see the conclusion of the letter in verse 7. Here's the conclusion, verse 7: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God."

Now there are two elements to this conclusion. First of all, there's the exhortation given, in verse 7a: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." God is speaking here. The question is, Are we listening? You know, sometimes when my mind is on something else and my wife says something to me, it just goes right in one ear and out the other. I heard the sounds and I knew she was talking to me, but I just ignored her because I'm focused on what I'm doing, and I don't want to turn my attention away from what I'm doing to listen to and focus on what she has to say. So when it's all done, later on I'll ask, Now what did you say? Because I wasn't listening.

We do that to people all the time. We must *never* do it to Christ. That's why when we read His word, we need to give it focused and undivided attention. And when we hear His word preached in church, we need to give it our focused and undivided attention. It does no good to hear the sound of good preaching. It does no good to spend time reading the words of Scripture if our mind is off somewhere else.

So this is a personal challenge from Christ to each of us, to let every man take heed how he hears. For to him that hath, more shall be given. But to him that hath not, it shall be taken away, even that which he seems to have. You know, it's amazing to me how people who really don't listen, even though they're exposed to truth, wind up knowing less and less of it, and following less and less of it as the years go by. They could sit under the best preaching and they could read the Bible every day, but if they're not hearing, it does them no good. In fact, it just hardens them in sin, because they become familiar and indifferent.

The question is, will we listen carefully? Will we meditate thoughtfully? Will we act upon it zealously? The Spirit speaks to the heart through the word and through the preaching and through the message of Jesus. Let us not quench Him, and let us not grieve Him.

Now I want you to take note of one thing. Verse 7: He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says. And we see in verse 1 that it's Jesus speaking. That is, the words of the Spirit and the words of Jesus are made equivalent. Do you see that? This is because their persons are equivalent, in terms of their deity. Jesus is the word, but the Spirit is the one who inspires the

word so that it can be written down, and illuminates the word so that it can be understood, and brings the word to remembrance so that it can be applied. The Spirit plays a huge role in conveying to us the words of the Lord Jesus.

But notice what it says: He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says, to—what? The church at Ephesus? Is that what it says? Notice it's plural—the churches, plural. In other words, this letter isn't just meant for this church, it's meant for the other six churches of Asia, and their letters are meant for the church at Ephesus, because every one of these uses the plural “churches” in the conclusion. This letter isn't just for this assembly and nobody else, but this letter is for all the churches of all ages, between the first and the second coming of Jesus.

Then notice, not only the exhortation given—that is, Pay attention. Don't let it go in one ear and out the other. But secondly, notice the promise made, verse 7b. Here's the promise: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” Notice, “To him” that—what?—overcomes. That is, here is the person who did *not* give in to the forces of evil, but rather, he defeated the forces of evil. Now this doesn't mean he didn't ever sin again; it doesn't mean he was perfect. What it means is that all the days of his life, he fought the good fight of faith and he remained faithful to Christ to the end in pursuing loving that Jesus, learning of that Jesus, and living for that Jesus by the grace and mercy of God. In other words, he kept the faith. The overcomer is the conqueror. He fights against sin and the Devil and the world, and he perseveres in the battle to the end. He never quits, he never changes sides, and he never goes apostate.

How many people have you known who made a very fair profession of faith in Christ—they were baptized, they went to church, they learned the doctrine, they lived the life—and then they grew cold and indifferent? And over the years they quit going to church, they quit reading their Bibles, and they became indistinguishable from the world in the way in which they lived, and even say things like, Well, that was my old life, but now I'm living this way.

Those people did not overcome, they *were* overcome. And people say, Well, once saved always saved. They made a profession of faith in Christ, and so therefore it doesn't matter how they live. They're going to heaven. The Bible knows nothing of that teaching. The Bible says you have to be an overcomer if you're going to make it to heaven. And what do you have to overcome? You have to overcome the temptation to abandon and apostatize from Christ under the pressure of the seductions of the world and the pressure of the persecutions of the world. That's what it means to be an overcomer.

It means you never stop following Christ, loving Christ, serving Christ, witnessing for Christ, and seeking to learn more of Christ and to follow Him better. Those are the overcomers, because what's this book about? This book is about the battle between Christ and Satan, and between Satan's people and Christ's people, right? And the question is, Are you going to take the mark of the beast? Are you going to start thinking like the world and acting like the world? Those people were overcome. But those who think like God and act like God and seek to serve God,



those are the overcomers. They overcame the pressure from the world to apostatize from Christ, to move out of the kingdom of light and move in to kingdom of darkness.

That's the temptation, that's the pressure, that's what we have to overcome. And if we do, it says we'll get to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. Now once again, we're going to turn to the end of the story, Revelation 22. Revelation 22 and verse 1 and 2. Here's the new heavens and the new earth.

“<sup>1</sup> And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. <sup>2</sup> In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life,” there it is, “which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” Now notice verse 14. It says, “<sup>14</sup> Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”

So this tree of life is simply a metaphor for the entrance into heaven. Now there may be an actual tree there, and we may actually be able to pick fruit off of it and eat it. And if so, that's great. But when He says in Revelation 2:7b, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God,” what He's saying is, To him that overcomes, that person gets to enter heaven. That person gets to have eternal life. That person gets to live forever in the paradise of God, which Adam lost.

So what He's offering them is eternal salvation if, what? If you overcome. Overcome what? The temptation to just take this Christianity stuff and just throw it away or make it just a parenthesis in my life, or something I do from time to time. No, it's something that I fight hard for, I labor for, I have patience in, I persevere in, I do it for His name's sake, all the while loving Him with all my heart and soul and mind and strength. Such a person has genuine faith, and such a person will wind up in the paradise of God. That is the conclusion of the letter. Be an overcomer. Here's the promise if you are.

This is the reason why, people, we believe the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. It is those who endure to the end that are saved, not those who endure as long as it's easy, but then when the seduction comes or the persecution comes, throw it over for the pleasures of the world or for the favor of the world, and thus deny Christ. Don't go there. That's the message of the book of Revelation. You're going to hear that message 50 times over as we go through this book: Be an overcomer. You're in a spiritual war. You're getting clobbered. Fight the good fight. Keep focused on Christ. Keep loving Him. Shall we pray together.

Father, thank you for our Lord Jesus. Father, we do love Him. We're ashamed of how coldhearted we are toward Him, and we ask, Father, that you would help us to stir up our love for Jesus, just like we have to work at stirring up our love for our husband or our wife. Father, we have to stir up our love for our fellow believers. Lord, we certainly would expect that we have to stir up our love for Jesus.

Father, may we reflect often on what He has done for us, and may the Spirit use those reflections to enflame our love, and especially now as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, may our love for Jesus grow. In Christ's name we ask it. Amen.