

## Ephesus: The Forgetful Church

LL&L

Revelation 2:1-7

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### Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **Revelation 2:1-7. Pray.**

### Background

#### **Recap of Series:**

- John, Exile – Patmos
- Vision from HS – 7 letters to 7 ancient churches in modern day turkey
- These 7 cities made up the ancient postal route, you can track them in a circle
- First letter – Ephesus



#### **Background to Ephesus:**

##### **CITY**

- Prominent city in both ancient world + in the Scriptures
  - Extremely wealthy
  - Extremely wicked (sexual immorality/prostitution/idol worship)

##### **CHURCH**

- Paul (Acts 18) – plants a church here 50 years before letter w/ Priscilla and Aquila
- Gospel turns the city upside down – Revival + Riots
- He ends up staying to pastor here for a few years
- Timothy then becomes the leader at this church for a while (that’s where he is when Paul writes 1+2 Tim to him)
- Then John, the author of Revelation, takes over for Timothy as the leader in this church

***So the Church in Ephesus has this history of being a robust, gospel-centered church in the middle of this insane epicenter of wealth and wickedness. And they are the ones to get the first letter from Jesus.***

***Some of it is going to be encouraging, some of it...not so much.***

### Positive Encouragements

**1 “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. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.**

Jesus starts by commending and encouraging the Ephesian Church because they have 2 things – **good deeds** and **good doctrine.**

**He first commends their good deeds.** Jesus says I see how you're working. How you're laboring. How you're toiling and have not grown weary. Jesus commends their good religious activity – he probably has in mind things like serving the poor, showing hospitality, sharing the gospel with their neighbors. These are good things that Jesus says are good things.

**Then he also commends their good doctrine.** They're defending the truth. Rebuking these false teachers. Fighting to know God rightly and view God rightly. They signed up for their church's institute just like all of us are going to do this Spring, right? That's a joke.

Jesus is commending the church here – "I see it. I see what you're doing for me. I see that you care about getting this right."

### Abandoned Your First Love

**They've got good deeds and good doctrine. They're doing good things for Jesus, they know a lot about Jesus. What's the problem? Well Jesus is gonna tell 'em. Verse 4...**

**4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.**

This is a terrifying verse. This verse tells us it's possible to come to church, to be committed to the Bible, to serve faithfully, to follow all the rules for righteous living, and yet do all of it without love for Jesus.

You see this church in Ephesus has been around for a little bit. It's been 50+ years since Paul preached that first gospel message, since the revival and the riots. And they've stuck it out with doing the right things, they've passed down from one generation to the next their commitment to good doctrine and theology.

And yet somewhere along the way they stopped doing it because of their love for Jesus. Somewhere along the way it just became a bunch of religious activity. Somewhere along the way, they abandoned their first love.

**There's a wide variety of faith journeys in this room.** There's some of you who have been walking with Jesus for a very short amount of time, a couple of months, a couple of years. There's others who wouldn't even claim to be a Jesus follower yet – you're still exploring the faith, asking questions.

And yet there's others of us in the room, our walk with Christ is going on decades. You're like – I grew up around this stuff. I knew the books of the Bible before I knew the alphabet. I had every Awana badge that existed. I did the youth camp thing, I did the mission trip thing, I did the college ministry thing.

And here's the danger we have to see from what Jesus says to the church at Ephesus – **The danger is that as your faith grows old, your heart grows cold.**

Have you heard the saying – **familiarity breeds contempt?**

The unfortunate truth is so often that's what happens to many of us in the Christian life. Familiarity breeds contempt. Or better yet – **familiarity breeds complacency.**

As we follow Jesus over an extended period of time, the danger is that we would not gradually grow more in love with Him, but rather we would grow casual to the things of Christ, cold to His love as it becomes more and more familiar. Apathetic to his grace as we think we've heard it all before.

**The danger is that familiarity with Christ, His glory, His word – doesn't lead to more and more delight, but more and more indifference.**

We look at new Christians with a sort of ½ jealousy, ½ sadness – I remember when I was new and excited.

**Journal.** And if we're being honest, this can happen to all of us at some point or another. I'll go first, this is me. I mean this week this passage has been punching me in the gut. On Tuesday night I found some of my old journals, and I spent some time just looking through stuff that I had written during my senior year of college. If you know my story, that's when the Holy Spirit really started getting a hold of my heart after a period of rebellion.

And every entry is like all caps just like aggressive bold font (I was a bit more angsty back then), but so many are just desperate pleas for God to move and to work and to send revival among my group of friends in college. And just about how much I wanted to want Him more. Just passionate prayers and pleas.

And the Holy Spirit just convicts me – is that how you felt about Community Group tonight? Was that your heart level desire for the 20 people who were going to sit in a circle in your basement – are you crying out for renewal and revival? Are you doing this ministry out of love for me? Like deep, passionate, gripped by the gospel love...or are you doing it because it meets at your house and your the pastor?

I was convicted and I had to do some real soul searching – how much of my Christian life is just because it's my job? I get paid to read the Bible and pray. It's awesome. I'm the most blessed man in the world. But it's a real danger that I would, in the midst of a full schedule of Christian activity, forsake my first love.

**Is this anyone else but me? Anyone else feel this?**

- When you first became a Christian, you were just pumped about the Scriptures. Friday night, "Sorry I can't go to the party, I'm gonna stay home and read my Bible." The Word of God was alive to you and you were getting insights as if Jesus Himself was in the room speaking to you. But now it seems like you're just trying to fight off sleep and you forget what you read immediately, if you even have the willpower to get out of bed or put your phone down at all.
- When you first became a Christian and got connected to a local church, it was like you could not believe there were other people on this planet who loved you and loved Jesus too. You were like – who wants to hang out. All the time. Coffee and prayer all the time. And now Community Group is that looming weekly burden of getting in the car, fighting Charlotte traffic, sitting in a circle staring awkwardly at one another until someone answers the question.
- When you first became a Christian you loved getting to come to worship and to serve on a team and to play a role in welcoming our church family to celebrate Jesus together, now that alarm clock goes off and you think "can't they find someone else to set up the stage? Or watch the kids today? Or press some buttons to make the slides work?"

***Do you resonate with that at all?***

I don't mean you are having a bad day, or a bad week. Sometimes I'm worried my love has grown cold and it's just the fact that I only got 4 hours of sleep last night and I haven't had my coffee yet.

I mean the consistent, day in and day out posture of your heart towards the things of God is just sort of "meh". Going through the motions. Maybe given up on the motions altogether. Routine, mundane, a chore.

## How to Return to Your First Love

**If that's you, if that's where you find yourself now, or maybe you'll find yourself there soon, I've got bad news and I've got good news.**

**The bad news is that Jesus says it's their fault.**

We need to be clear on what has happened to their first love. Jesus says – **you have abandoned it**. Other translations – **you have forsaken it**.

So let's be clear on this, for them and for us – They have not **lost** their love. They have not **misplaced** their love. Like they woke up one morning and suddenly it was gone.

**This is how we fool ourselves into thinking our love for Jesus works. Like we just woke up one morning and we suddenly weren't caring about the things of God anymore.**

As if it's some fleeting feeling we have to grab and take hold of.

- But love for Jesus is not a fleeting feeling, it's a fire you stoke through the spiritual practices God has given us.
- It's a fire you tend to by walking in deep community where you are known and loved by others.
- It's a fire you watch and protect from what you would allow into your mind and heart that would put it out.

The Ephesians' first love didn't sneak away one night. They abandoned it. They forsook it.

**The good news is that Jesus shows them a path to getting it back...**

If you find yourself here...stale. Dry. Apathetic. Forsaken your first love. If that's where you're at, AND you don't want to be there. You want that first love, here's the good news – there's hope and there's a way forward.

You're not a victim. You're not a slave to apathy. "I just wish I could be in love with Jesus again." You can. Jesus Himself tells the Ephesians church, and us, what to do. He does not leave it up to speculation, or guessing, or wishful thinking.

But Jesus is clear with this church – it's up to you. Yes it's Holy Spirit empowered. Yes it's a community project they do together, but Jesus is clear – here's the steps you have to walk.

Listen to me on this – your group cannot make you love Jesus. Your spouse cannot make you love Jesus. Your pastors cannot make you love Jesus. Too many pastors burn themselves out, run themselves ragged, trying to get people to care about Jesus. We can't do that. Only the Holy Spirit can do that when you're willing to do the things Jesus says to do.

***Here's the path from Jesus Himself.***

3 steps, and they're all in the beginning of verse 5...

**5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.**

### **1. Remember**

Jesus says to the church at Ephesus – First step – Remember. Specifically remember from where you have fallen.

Meaning – **remember what it was like when you first encountered the love of God.**

When the gospel first came to Ephesus it turned their world upside down. There were riots in the city because their whole economic system was being derailed. So many idol worshippers and idol makers were turning to Jesus that a huge part of their economy was collapsing. These people were so enthralled with Christ, so mesmerized by His gospel that their whole lives were turning upside down. Everything was different about them now.

Jesus says – remember that. Remember that love you had at first. Remember where you were before you fell.

**Horseshoe Walks.** Lindsay and I started dating in the spring semester of my senior year, her junior year at the University of South Carolina. And at the time she lived on this part of campus known as the Horseshoe. It's this part of campus that has all of these beautiful historic oak trees.

Now, Lindsay and I have never been night people. 10pm bedtime is late for us. But when we first started dating I would drive to campus at like 9pm and we would walk hundreds and hundreds of laps on that horseshoe till 1am, 2am, just talking about everything and nothing at the same time.

I was just so infatuated with her from the jump. I just want to be around this person all of the time.

And now what happens is every time we go back to Columbia to see my family, if we're near USC Lindsay wants to stop, and we'll go walk the horseshoe. And she'll always tell the same stories. "Remember when we used to walk around here and talk for hours." Such a sap.

**But here's the deal, as much as I make fun of her for the inevitable nostalgia trip she wants to take, there's something really beautiful about it.** Because each time she brings up those first few weeks, first few months of dating, all of these memories come flooding back into my mind.

- Our first date to her sorority formal where I lied and said I had to use the bathroom because I was too nervous to dance with her.
- Our 2nd date where we ate the worlds' worst Indian food because the restaurant I planned to take her to was closed.

But more than anything it reminds me of the love we had at first. How I was willing to do anything short of breaking the law (with a few exceptions) to be with this person. I was willing to sacrifice so much, to commit everything I had to her. And it kindles, and it stokes, and it grows the deeper love that I have for her now a decade+ later.

Because here's the deal – Our love now can't be built on the butterflies and feelings we had then, but it can be aided by it.

And that's what Jesus is pointing the Church to. Have you lost your first love? **First step – remember what life with Jesus was like when you first met Him.**

Do you remember what it was like? Do you 'remember' what it was that made you feel that first desperate, 'sell everything and follow Him', run after him with reckless abandonment kind of love? When you first were captured by the good news of the gospel, did your heart not sing?

One of my favorite parts of being a pastor is in our membership process I get to hear so many of your stories of how you came to faith in Jesus. And so many of you have shared with me those moments. Where you experienced brokenness, sorrow, longing. So many of us have that moment where we were chasing our own desires and coming up so incredibly empty. And then one way or another Jesus grabbed us. Awakened us to His love. Showed us that by faith alone in Christ alone we have forgiveness of sins and life forever with God.

And so I've heard so many of you tell me what that was like when you first started following Him.

- You couldn't read the Bible enough.
- You couldn't pray enough.
- You couldn't worship enough.
- You signed up for every bible study and small group the church offered.
- All of your friends were annoyed because of how much you talked about Jesus and invited them to church.

Jesus says remember. **Remember.** Remember the glorious gospel truth and the way Jesus captured your soul.

And we have the tools to do that at our disposal.

- We preach the gospel every single sermon.
- We remember the gospel every single time we take communion.
- We celebrate the reconciling power of the gospel in our time of passing the peace.
- We sing the gospel.
- We remind each other of the gospel in group.
- We celebrate the gospel in someone else's life through baptism.
- We take time in member meetings and family vacation to tell stories about how Jesus is working in our lives.

These are all means of remembering. The solution when we feel disillusioned and going through the motions is to first use the God-given means of remembering the gospel. Remembering the captivating love of Jesus. Remembering the love we had at first.

## 2. Repent

Remember the love you had at first, remember from where you have fallen and **repent**.

The word repent in the Greek is the same root where we get the word metamorphosis. A change, to be like one thing and then turn and change to be like something else. We're turning aside from something and start heading in a different direction.

That's what Jesus is commanding this church to do. If you want to return to your first love, repent and turn away from what is souring and dampening and diminishing that love within you.

In the words of scholar Jim Hamilton in his commentary on this passage – **“What is it that keeps you from Bible study, prayer, and reliance on Christ? Your soul depends on your ability to repent of those things so that you might cultivate the first love that Jesus wants.”**

**Now, here's the issue though** – when we hear 'repent from what keeps you from loving Jesus' – our minds tend to immediately go towards “explicit sins”. Pornography keeps me from loving Jesus. Outbursts of anger keep me from loving Jesus. Work idolatry keeps me from loving Jesus.

And while all of that is true. What I would argue is just as dangerous and much more subtle are all of the other “little things” we let take up space in our hearts and minds that just sort of start to crowd out our ability and energy we have to give to loving God and being loved by Him.

And our city, our culture, our world are full of these little things: Little things that dull our appetite for the Bible Little things that steal the time we have for prayer.

**Here's how it works – You have a limited number of what I like to call “care molecules”.**

Meaning you have only so much energy you can give towards caring/loving about various things. And the danger to our love of God, and what we need to repent of, is all of the ways we give our care molecules away to trivial things that do not have eternal significance.

- So I'll talk to men all of the time who are genuinely wrestling with their apathy towards God, and yet will know a scary amount of fantasy football stats.
- I'll talk to women who struggle to find time to pray, and yet whose instagram and tiktok screen time is 5+ hours a day.
- This is me too – there's a competition show I absolutely love that runs every summer and part of it is that you can watch the contestants 24-7 as they live and interact and strategize. It's silly. But I notice how each summer it becomes a battle for my care molecules. For my limited energy and attention and affection.

Am I saying fantasy football is bad? Of course not.

Am I saying my favorite TV show is bad? Definitely not.

Am I saying social media is bad? Yes. Absolutely. But that's another sermon for another day.

I am saying if you find yourself struggling with a cold heart towards God, it's worth doing an honest self-examination of where your care molecules are going – politics, fashion trends, celebrities, click bait news, your lawn, your career, fill in the blank – and repenting from ways you've given your love to lesser things that have now made you forsake the love for Christ you had at first.

**John Piper – “The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18–20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.”**

So remember the love you had at first.

Repent and turn away from what is ruining your affection and appetite for God.

### **3. Return**

Jesus says – **do the works you did at first.**

Remember not only the affections you had at first, but remember what the affections drove you to do. Return to how you first lived life with God.

**You see the answer to our cold-heartedness, our going through the motions is not to stop doing things.**

That's how we're bent in today's world. Christians throughout history have struggled with their actions and their hearts not lining up. That has been a consistent problem throughout time – Christians worried about hypocrisy (not living like Christians when they claim to be) and legalism (living like a Christian to try and earn God's favor). Doing Christian things out of duty, not out of love. We've always been worried about that.

Just uniquely in the last 30-ish years, we've been (I would argue) the first generation of Christians to think the answer to that issue is to stop doing the thing, rather than to fix our hearts.

Almost everybody else in church history has thought – I’m doing Christian things without love for God, God is not pleased by that, so I need to figure out how to grow my love for God.

We think – I’m doing Christian things without love for God, God is not pleased by that, so I will stop doing the Christian things until I feel like it again.

And Jesus says – “no no.” The way to return to your first love is by continuing to do the things. Do the works you did at first. Return back to how you walked with God when you first entered into relationship with Him.

Don’t be fooled into thinking – “I’m apathetic about Jesus, so I don’t feel like doing this spiritual practice.” Rather be changed by the renewal of your mind into the reality – “I’m apathetic about Jesus, there’s nothing more important for me right now than to do this spiritual practice.”

This is why we push a rule of life so strongly. Having a set, predetermined rhythm and pattern for how you’re going to step into the practices of prayer, Scripture, fasting, sabbath – having it already determined and on your calendar – this is when I do these things.

You don’t make a rule of life for the good times, you make a rule of life for the hard ones. So that when you don’t feel like it, you still do it, such that your fire and love for Jesus is stoked as you wait for your feelings to catch up.

**The way you return to your love is not feeling → action. Feeling → Obedience. It’s obedience → feeling.** What did you do when you first met Jesus? How did being captured by his grace affect your life? Put those things back into place.

**REMEMBER. REPENT. RETURN.**

### Two Paths

Let’s finish up our passage, verse 5...

**If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 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.’**

Jesus lays out two paths before them. This is something He does throughout the gospels. Two ways – the way of death.

**Path 1** – The Ephesian church doesn’t change. Doesn’t remember, repent, or return. And Jesus says – I’ll remove your lampstand. You will not be a church anymore. A church who forsakes Jesus as their first love, does not have a long future as a church.

**Path 2** – verse 7 – The one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

This is a reference back to Genesis 3. The Tree of Life was in the Garden of Eden. And Adam and Eve were kicked out because of their sin and barred from eating the fruit of this tree. But the promise is that Jesus is one day going to return and usher in a new garden, an even better garden, a garden-city.

And Revelation 22 tells us the tree of life will be in the center of that city. And all who trust in Jesus, those who conquer with steadfast love for the true conqueror – will eat of the tree in paradise in the presence of God forever.



This is the promise we cling to. That there is a future hope to come, a future paradise that King Jesus is preparing for those who trust in Him.

### **Gospel Conclusion**

**So here's where I want to close...this question – Have you abandoned your first love?**

- Willing to walk these steps
- Never received Jesus – Gospel Invitation

Gospel – Christ first loved us. As His enemies, etc. etc.

Inviting us to freely love Him in return.

**Pray.**