Satan's Attack on the Spirit-Filled Church (Includes Rev. 2-3)
Scripture: Ephesians 6:10
Code: 1952

Look with me, would you, at Ephesians chapter 6. This morning again I'm not going to continue our series of Ephesians simply because we're going to take a little break the next few weeks and I don't want to get into chapter 6 verses 10 and following until we can do it as a unit. It is the section on the armor of the Christian and it deserves our concentrated attention, and rather than just begin and then depart and then come back to it again, I'd rather wait until after Easter and then really go at it with all of our efforts.

And so this morning I want to sort of use Ephesians 6:10 to 12, which is our next Scripture, just as a jumping off point to begin some thoughts that I think are really essential for us today. About once a year I get the feeling that I need to speak pointedly to issues regarding the future of Grace Church. And this Scripture, as I was reading it over and praying about what the Lord would have me share with you this week, really kind of set the tone for me. You'll notice in verse 10 of Ephesians 6, which is the next verse in our continuing study, "finally my brethren be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in the heavenlies." And we'll stop there.

And I was reading that I was saying to myself that really is the way to end the book of Ephesians because what the apostle Paul is saying is this: if you are a true Christian as defined in chapter 1, chapter 2 and chapter 3, and if you are living the way a true Christian should live as defined in chapter 4, 5 and 6, then you can be sure of one thing and that is that you are going to run right into the enemy. It is impossible to live in the manner that Ephesians outlines without having conflict with Satan. It's impossible.

And that's why having said all of this he says "the final thing you need to know is that you have to be strong. You have to put on the armor of God because you're in a spiritual war." It's a war. I remember when I first came to Grace Church that I thought it was a honeymoon, and then a few years later I kind of felt that it wasn't quite so adventurous. It was more like work. I'd have to crank out all these sermons, preach them on Sunday, start all over again on Monday again, and since I hadn't had any backlog I was telling you everything I knew, I was racing like mad to stay up, and it was work.

A few years ago I woke up and realized it isn't a honeymoon and it isn't work. It's war. We're in a battle. It's a war, and that's essentially what Paul is saying here. If we are, as Ephesians 4:1 says,

“walking worthy of the vocation to which we’re called.” If we’re walking in humility and unity, not in the vanity of our mind as the Gentiles. If we’re putting on the new man. If we’re walking in love, not lust. If we’re walking in light, not darkness. If we’re walking in wisdom, not foolishness. If we’re not drunk with wine but filled with the Spirit.

If we’re not singing the world’s songs but psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and if rather than being proud and individualistic we are submitting ourselves one to another, and if we are submitting as wives should to husbands as to the Lord, and if husbands are loving their wives as Christ loved the church, and if children are obeying their parents and parents are nurturing and rearing their children to the things of God, and if employees and employers have right relationships biblically and with Spirit-filled impact, then believe me, we will counter the system. We will run against the grain.

And that’s exactly what’s happening in our society. I received a phone call this week from CBS network. They wanted me to come on for an hour and debate a woman feminist from the National Organization of Women. We are becoming known around the world. Not always for the things that we believe but for the things that people think we believe. I have received clippings almost every day from somebody in the country who has pulled out an article about our church misrepresenting where we’re at or what we’re trying to say to one degree or another and very concerned about whether I’ve gone crazy.

But the point that I’m making is that we have begun to take a stand against some things in the world. We’ve always done this. It’s just that our size and our impact and the great blessing of God has made all of this something the world can’t ignore anymore, and so we’re starting to make waves in the world. And it’s kind of exciting but believe me, when God begins to bless a church, Satan begins to attack the same church, and if you think you’ve started coming to Grace just so you can settle in your little nest out there in the corner somewhere and get real comfy you’re wrong. I think that we’re about to be tested, maybe in ways we’ve never been tested before.

The Bible talks about the believer being a soldier, and I think that’s right, and Paul said to Timothy, “as soldiers endure hardness,” and that means “suffer with.” And I really feel that because of the fact that God has blessed us He is requiring much of us. You know the world watches this church. It’s amazing to me. I receive mail every day from foreign countries, from pastors from every imaginable country in the globe. I receive regularly letters from pastors in obscure places in India, in places in other parts of the Orient, in Europe and South America, South Africa, the main part of Africa, New Zealand, Australia.

It goes on and on and on like that, saying “tell us what you’re doing in your church. How and why is God blessing?” And then I see not only the eyes of the pastors and the churches of the world but the eyes of the media, people watching us, the unregenerate world watching us, and God is doing a wonderful thing, and I trust and pray that it’s to His glory, but any time that begins to happen we need

to be warned.

I think about the apostle Paul, the same town of Ephesus. He went into Ephesus and incredible things happened. He went into that town and he began to preach the Word of God in the synagogue “and some hardened their hearts,” it says in Acts 19, “but some believed and the ones that believed listened to him,” and he taught but finally the others were so antagonistic they ran him out of the synagogue and he went to the school of Tyrannus, and for two years he taught every day, probably from 1:00 in the afternoon to 5:00 in the evening for two solid years. And it says that great things happened, miracles were wrought by the hands of the apostle Paul, the people who were involved in incredible kinds of magical worship began to burn their magic books. There was riot.

And the guys who sold the little silver gods that were part of the trade found that they weren’t able to do it anymore. People were really becoming iconoclastic. They were smashing their idols and the city was in incredible uproar, and it says in Acts 19 “so mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.” And that great Ephesian church founded by Paul, later on given direction by Aquila and Priscilla and finally by Timothy and Apollos, knew the best of men and the best of circumstances and the greatest history. And yet when they began to really move Satan began to attack, and he began to attack in very subtle ways because that’s always his plan.

You know I believe in Ephesians 3:20, “Now in him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think according to the power that worketh in us unto him be glory in the church.” I believe He wants glory in His church and I believe He gains that glory by allowing the church through His power to do things beyond what we can even dream, and I think God wants to go way beyond where we are now. I think we’re just beginning to see what God would do when a group of people is totally committed to walk a worthy walk, when a group of people is totally committed to live the kind of life that Ephesians 4, 5, and 6 calls for.

But as soon as that begins, Satan will oppose it. We see it all around us. You go back into the Old Testament for example and you see God sending an angel in Daniel chapter 10, and a demon withholds that angel so that that angel cannot accomplish the divine purpose, and God had to dispatch a greater angel, a stronger angel to blast that demon out and send that angel on his way. You’ll find in Jude 9, Michael the archangel having a battle with Satan over the body of Moses. Satan trying to restrain Michael from claiming the body of Moses for God.

So there is a high-level spiritual struggle and we’re even involved. Ephesians 6:12, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness and the heavenlies.” So we are engaged in this tremendous conflict, and that’s why I say it’s war. I think American Christianity has become very smug and very content and almost subcultural, rather than confronting we’re just kind of waltzing along with the system, trying to accommodate it. We believe we can win them by becoming what they are.

But just the opposite is true. We have to counter the system. Well, we need to be aware of the fact that Satan's going to attack. You know James in chapter 4 says "resist the devil and he will flee from you." 1 Peter chapter 5, verse 8 and 9, Peter says "Be sober, be vigilant." Why? "Because you're adversary the devil like a roaring lion walks about seeking whom he may devour. Whom resist steadfast in faith knowing the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world." In other words, Satan is going to be there. Resist him. Be sober. Be vigilant. Be aware. Be alert and know what he's doing.

2 Corinthians 2:11 says that "we should not be ignorant of his devices lest he gain an advantage of us." In Acts chapter 20 Paul was talking to those same leaders in the Ephesian church, and he said to them this: he said, "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in, not sparing this flock and of your own selves shall men arise teaching perverse things." He says, "I know as well as I know my name. I know as well as I know the sun comes up tomorrow you're going to get it as soon as I leave from outside and inside, wolves from the outside and false teachers from the inside." "Therefore," verse 31 of Acts 20, "I have not ceased to warn you night and day for the space of three years with tears," he says. Part of the ministry is a warning ministry.

When God has blessed us as He has, when God has multiplied His audience as He has, and God is using us to cut a path through this evil world then, believe me, Satan is going to come after us, and we have to be ready and we have to get the armor on, but first of all we've got to understand his attack. We've got to understand his ploy. We do not want to be ignorant of his devices.

How does Satan attack us? Well, for the answer to that I want you to turn to Revelation chapter 1. You know I had an interesting thing happen to me one time. I went into a room. I was called in to where a girl was filled with demons and the demons all had different voices. They used her mouth and so forth to speak, but the voices were not hers, and it was amazing because there was a terrible thing going on in this room and this girl had flipped over a desk and was slashing and smashing things around.

And when I walked in the door all of a sudden she hit the chair and just looked at me in a frenzied look and in a voice not her own, because I knew her own voice - the voice said, "Get him out. Not him. Get him out." My reaction to that was I was excited, because I was glad those demons knew who's side I was on. They know. Believe me.

They know me. And they know this church and they know what God is doing here, and they'll try to stop it and the way they'll stop it or try to stop it is through you because a church is only a collection of links like a chain and only as strong as its weakest one. Satan is going to attack. How does he attack? I believe the Lord shows us in the letters of Revelation 2 and 3.

I believe in the letters to the churches, the seven churches of Asia Minor, the first of which is Ephesus, and then the others that were literally born out of the Ephesian church. The other six being also in Asia Minor. I believe the Lord gives us insight into how Satan attacks the church and at least once every year or so I feel compelled to warn our church in this regard.

Now let's set the scene by looking at Revelation chapter 1 and verse 9. John the beloved apostle is on the isle of Patmos; he was in exile for his faith, and here it is that God gives him marvelous visions and in these visions he sees what God wants to reveal about the church. Now you'll notice in verse 10 John says, "I was in the Spirit," and by that I think he means that he is in a position to receive revelation from the Spirit "on the Lord's day." That would be on a Sunday. "And I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest write in a book and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia" - Asia Minor. "Unto Ephesus, unto Smyrna, unto Pergamum, unto Thyatira, unto Sardis, unto Philadelphia and unto Laodicea."

Now the Lord has a word for these seven churches. Most interestingly these are seven historical, actual, real churches, but they are also prototypes of churches that exist in all periods of church history, because each of them has a unique characteristic to which the Lord speaks. And there are churches in every age including today that could be classified as Ephesian churches or Smyrna churches or Pergamum churches or Thyatira or Sardis or Philadelphia or Laodicean churches. And so they are not just historical churches, though they are that, but they present to us a prototype for other periods of history.

Now notice the scene in verse 12. "I turned to see the voice that spoke to me and being turned I saw seven golden lampstands." What are the seven golden lamp stands? Verse 20 tells you at the end the seven lampstands are the seven churches. So here is John's vision. He sees a lampstand which is symbolic of each of the churches and the lamp is blazing, it's lit, and the church is to be a light in the world, isn't it? It's to be the place that lights up the darkness. And so there they are, the seven churches of Asia Minor, each represented by a lampstand.

And in the midst of the seven lampstands "one like the Son of man." This is Jesus Christ, and He's moving in His church, He's moving through the church. And he's clothed with a garment down to the foot. By the way, garments like that were worn by priests, prophets and kings, and so the consummation of all of those elements in Christ. He was girded about His middle with a golden girdle. "His head and his hair were white like wool as white as snow" - speaking of His holiness and His purity – "and his eyes were like a flame of fire," searching and penetrating.

So here is the Lord and we see Him in His kingly, priestly, prophetic garb, and we see Him with white so that He symbolizes purity and then His eyes searching, penetrating as He evaluates the church.

“And his feet like fine bronze as if they burned in a furnace.” Why? Because He has to judge His church sometimes. Peter even said it. “Judgment must begin at the house of God.” And we see also that “his voice is like the sound of many waters,” a great, commanding, authoritative voice.

He had in His right hand seven stars. What are they? Verse 20 tells you. “The seven stars in the middle of the voice are the angels or the ministers of the seven churches.” And so in His hand are the ministers, and He moves among the churches evaluating, searching, penetrating, examining the churches, getting ready to write the seven letters. His evaluation is in chapter 1. The result is in chapter 2 and 3. And so he begins, John does, with the letters in chapter 2.

And what does the Lord say to these churches? Well, beloved, let me tell you, these are seven absolutely incredible letters. Five of them, mark it, are warnings. To two of the churches there is no warning. To the church at Smyrna and Philadelphia apparently there needed to be no warning. The church at Smyrna was the persecuted church. The church at Philadelphia was the evangelizing, aggressive, soul-winning church. Seems to me that those two things are wonderful preservatives.

When a church is persecuted it tends to maintain its purity because all of the impurity drops out. You’re not about to identify with an outfit where you’re going to get persecuted unless you’re pretty serious. Right? So persecution has a way of purifying and so does evangelism, because as long as you’re heart is toward the world and as long as you’re aggressively reaching the lost you tend to be going outward rather than ingrown. And the Philadelphia church, the church with the open door, was a blessed church, and the Smyrna church, the church that was being rained on by the fires of the opposition, was a blessed church, but the other five stood in need of deep warnings.

And there’s a progression to the five warnings. They start at what seems a very, a very light kind of situation and they become so oppressive as to finally become apostate and a church which is utterly no church at all. There’s a descending thing that we’ve seen happen in many churches throughout history.

As I look at Grace Church and I read those five warnings as I did this week, I’m very much aware that the same thing could happen to us that’s happened to thousands and thousands and thousands of churches around the world. You start out so good. You start out like the Ephesian church did and the descent comes and pretty soon you’ve got nothing left. I’ve been in auditoriums in this country that seat 4,000 people, and on a Sunday morning there’s 150 liberals huddled in the front and that’s it. I’ve seen that. I’ve seen God write “Ichabod” on a lot of things and a lot of churches, but I don’t want that to happen.

We’re talking about putting a balcony in here. We’ve just added 200 and some odd seats in the back because the city gave us permission, and then we’re talking about a balcony and an education building and all of these things and I am excited about that, but only if I know that when that balcony

is there it's going to be occupied by people who will hear the Word of God. And that building is going to be occupied by children and young people and adults who are going to love the Lord Jesus Christ with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Otherwise I'm not interested, and I want to do what I can to warn you because I believe Satan would like to turn this place into a great big stone quarry with nothing left but a bunch of rocks.

So what do we need to be warned about? Let's look and see. First of all, the thing that hit the church at Ephesus. They left their first love. They left their first love. This is enough to make a message all on its own. Notice verse 1, "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write: these things saith he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands." This is the Son of man. This is Jesus Christ writing to His own church. This isn't somebody's opinion. This is Christ.

And he says in verse 2 to them, "I know thy works," and man it was a fabulous story in Ephesus, it was an incredible history there, how they had literally thrown a city into confusion and chaos. They had overturned a system of religion. That little group of believers that started out in the midst as if they were an island of purity in a sea of wretchedness had been able to so infiltrate and purify parts of that city that they brought to a halt some of the most complex systems of religion at that time. That little group of people had an incredible beginning and who could think of a better one to begin it than Paul? And who could think of more wonderful pastors than Apollos who was the greatest proclaimer of the Word of God and oratorical ability perhaps that ever lived, and better than Timothy who was one who would teach them the same things in the same way Paul did. They had those people for their leaders, and they were a working church.

I know your *kopos*, he says, your hard work to the point of sweat. You really go after it. You're involved, your labor, your patience; you have *hupomone*, you are able to endure through the tough times, and man, being in Ephesus wasn't an easy place. The center of the worship of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the world, the temple was an incredible mess. There were scores of eunuchs, thousands of priestess prostitutes, herald singers, flautists, and on and on just creating a hysteria of music and orgy and drunkenness and frenzy and sexual mutilation so that Heraclitus said that the morals of the people of that temple were less than that of animals.

That the preaching of Paul had so affected all of that that the idol sales dropped off and a riot resulted. They were a tremendous church. They had endurance in the midst of a tough place, really tough. And he says not only that but "you can't bear them that are evil." You can't handle those that are evil, he says. You're dealing with sin. You don't tolerate sin for a minute. When somebody comes along and they're doing evil, you deal with that. You are intolerant of sinners.

Look at verse 6. It says "This thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate," and the Nicolaitans apparently were resulting from an individual named Nicolas who was a

man who espoused sexual immorality. Someone said of Nicolas “he abandoned himself to pleasure like a goat.” Whatever this thing was, and we’re not really sure, it seems to have come from that. We know that it has to do with licentious, lewd, immoral, evil, fornicating-type of behavior.

And he says, “You hate that. You have the works going. You’re laboring. You’re patient. You don’t tolerate sin.” And verse 2 says, “You even try them who say they are apostles and are not.” In other words, “You deal with the false teachers, you have a biblical standard, you’ve got a statement of faith, you’ve got a theology, and you measure men by it. You’re doctrinally solid. You’re dealing with sin. You’re working hard.”

Man, it sounds like a great church, and it says in verse 3, repeating, “you have borne.” You’ve endured things in the past, and you’ve come out all right, and you “have patience and for My name’s sake you labored.” Listen, that’s the greatest motive for anything a Christian does. “For My name’s sake you did it.” The glory of God was their motive, the highest motive in all the universe. You even had the right motive. You were serving My glory, My name, and you labored and you didn’t faint.

Well, what a great church - doctrinally solid, busy unmasking the false teachers, disciplining those that were sinning. They really had it together but they had one fatal flaw, and you go back to verse 14 of chapter 1, and you see that Christ’s eyes are like a flame of fire. They search and they penetrate, and the searching, penetrating eyes of Jesus Christ found a fatal flaw in verse 4. “Nevertheless I have this against thee because thou hast left thy first love.” This is the church where love died. Orthodoxy, activity without love.

When they read it it must have hit like a thunderbolt because nobody thinks he loves God as much as the orthodox do, the fundamental, the evangelical. And yet their definition of love wasn’t God’s. They missed the one basic thing that Jesus had said to Peter three times. “Peter before I ask you to feed my sheep I’ve got to ask you something else. Peter do you love me? Peter do you love me? Peter do you love me? If you say yes then feed my sheep.” Why? Because you cannot be effective for God apart from loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

And you know, people, I can see this potential problem at Grace Church. We have so much; we are involved in so much that it becomes very easy for us to get our focus off the personality of Jesus Christ. We lose the love, and all of a sudden we are satisfied with the activity. That’s not it.

This is one of the greatest churches in all history and yet the Lord’s penetrating eyes found this fatal flaw. They had turned in their hot hearts for cold orthodoxy. They were becoming those who simply carried out a very biblical ministry. There just wasn’t any passion there. And I warn you about that and I warn my own heart. From the elders and the pastoral staff right down to those that are visiting us. If we ever get to the place where what we do is an orthodox performance without love, that’s step one and Satan has a foothold.

And you don't even want to know what the rest of the steps are but you're going to find out. When you come to the place where the honeymoon ends and you don't do what you do out of an overwhelming love for Jesus Christ you're in real trouble. Look at your own life. Is the enthusiasm for Christ there or is the thrill gone? Is it a fair description of your Christian life to say, "Well, I just kind of do it. I don't have the same love I used to have." If you love anything in this world more than you love Jesus Christ you've lost your first love. Yourself, your family, your leisure, money, success – anything - you've lost it. If the honeymoon's over in your life like it was in Ephesus, we're in real trouble, real trouble. If you're serving the Lord Jesus Christ at this church as an orthodox performance rather than a passion of love for Him, then you've missed it. You have missed it, all together.

You say, "Well what do I do if I feel that way?" Verse 5, three things. Remember. Remember. It's amazing. Spiritual defection usually comes from forgetting. Spiritual defection usually comes from forgetting, and so he says, "Remember." Did you forget what it used to be? Remember how it was before your love grew cold. Remember that warmth and that fire and that joy and that exhilaration. Remember.

Secondly, repent. "Remember therefore from where you're fallen and repent." It is a fall you know. Not to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Not to have that first love for Him and for others. Not to have that first love is a fall from which you must repent.

Listen. If the first reaction you have to a believer is anything but love, you've lost your first love. If the first reaction you have to Jesus Christ is anything less than consummate love, you've lost your first love and you need to repent. And then he says a third thing. Remember, repent, and repeat, and "do the first works." Go back to how it used to be. If it's cold, mechanical service in orthodoxy, go back to where it all started. Get back to your knees. Get back to the Book. Get back to witnessing. Get back to fellowship. Get back to prayer. Get back to sharing and praising the Lord. Stay close to the fire, that's what He's saying.

You know what happened in Ephesus? They didn't do it. They didn't remember and they didn't repent and they didn't repeat, and so what it says in verse 5 happened. "I will come unto thee quickly and remove thy lampstand out of its place except thou repent." The church in Ephesus died, went out of existence. Great, evangelical, orthodox, historic, monumental church went out of existence because it lost its first love.

There's a second thing to be aware of. Verse 12 of chapter 2. We skipped the church at Smyrna because that was the persecuted church and it isn't warned. "But to the angel at the church in Pergamum write; These things saith he who has the sharp sword with two edges." That's the Lord, and the sword is a sword of judgment coming out of His mouth as in Revelation 19, Hebrews chapter

4. He says “I know thy works,” verse 13, “and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s throne is: and that thou holdest fast my name and hast not denied my faith even in those days in which Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwells.”

Stop right there. He says, “Pergamus, I know everything about you. My searching, penetrating gaze reveals all these things. I know your works. I know you’re involved. I know you’re active. I know there’s something going on, and I know that you are where Satan’s throne is. You’re in a tough place.” And man, Pergamus was a tough city. Do you know that Pergamus was the center of emperor worship, the center of the worship of Caesar?

Do you know that it was the center of the worship of Zeus, the great god - some say the greatest god of all that system of deities - and that in the city of Pergamus they had built a huge altar to Zeus in the shape of a throne, and so some feel that the throne of Satan, as mentioned in verse 13, is a reference to the altar of Zeus, the greatest, most famous, largest altar in the world.

On the other hand, Pergamus had its own god by the name of Asclepius. He was the Pergamese god who was associated with healing, the god of healing. He’s always been associated with snakes, and in Pergamus they had a temple and a medical school. You still see a snake on the symbol of a physician, and that really comes from Greek mythology, from this Asclepius, the god of healing. And in the temple they had nonpoisonous snakes all over the floor, and people who were ill would come and lie there so that those snakes could crawl over them and everywhere they touched them they would be healed.

Listen, it was tough being in Pergamus. It was tough being a little group of Christians in the midst of a terrible Pagan society. So He says, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is, and I know you hold fast My name and you have not denied the faith, even to the point where some of you died, namely one dear brother, Antipas, whose life was taken away in that place where Satan dwells.” Boy, you know it’s tough, but let me tell you something, folks. To live in a tough city, to be in a tough environment, to live in a tough time of the world and name the name of Jesus Christ. Listen, there’s no reason to lower the standards even then. That doesn’t change them. Even then they’re the same.

God says, “I know it’s tough there. That doesn’t change the standards. I know it’s hard. That doesn’t change anything. Even though you’ve endured and even though you’ve been martyred and even though you’ve worked on for the Lord, even though you’ve upheld his name,” verse 14, “I have a few things against you.” And what is it?

“Because you have them there that hold the doctrine of Balaam who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication.” Let me tell you what that is. Balaam got the children of Israel to intermarry with the pagans and to get into their idolatry, and what He’s saying here is: that’s compromised with pagan

systems. And the problem in the church at Pergamus was they were compromising with the world.

They were intermarrying. I don't know whether that actually was going on, whether there were actually Christians intermarrying with non-Christians. Very likely that was happening. But the church at Pergamus began to court the world. They began to indulge themselves in worldly things.

They were violating 2 Corinthians 6, "What fellowship has light with darkness. What concord has Christ with Belial?" They were to "come out from among them and be separate and touch not the unclean thing," but they were the worldly church. They had let the world come in. They were doing what the world wanted them to do. They were aping the world.

It's amazing to me, and I've been telling this to you now for months. It's amazing to me how the church of Christ in America today is going all out, whole hog, to ape the world. They do it in so many ways. If the world's view of the family changes, the church accommodates it. If the world's view of the woman changes, the church accommodates it. If the world's view of the homosexual changes, the church accommodates it, and we get on the bandwagon with everything the world does. We want to identify with it. It's shocking. Just shocking. The church becomes materialistic because the world is materialistic. The church becomes preoccupied with entertainment because the world is preoccupied with entertainment. And just to give you an illustration with that, something I was reading this week. Do you know that in the last ten years, while there is a steady rise in the number of born-again people, there's a corresponding steady decline in the number of church members? Because these people aren't going to churches.

And this article I read this last week, very insightful article, said that the rise of what is known as the electronic church - there are many who feel is the number one reason people don't identify with a local church. They sit at home behind their little television and the church comes to them. They don't have to get dressed, don't have to leave the house, everything is all perfect. It's another part - watch this one - of the fantasy. You know, TV is a fantasy, and our world wants to live in that fantasy, and you go home and you sit there and that church is a perfect church.

I mean the music is unbelievable. It's unbelievable. Orchestras and people with flowing gowns and great singers, and the parade goes on and the lights and camera angles and all of this. And the preacher is perfectly in order, and he gives his message and there it is, the fantasy church, and you never sit next to anybody you don't like, and nobody ever talks to disturb you, and you don't have to find a place to park. It's glorious. And you just send in a little conscience money now and then and they'll tell you you're winning the world for doing that, and they'll send you a thing you can plaster on your wall to prove how sacrificial you are. Really it's a sad thing.

And you know what happens? One writer said that the electronic church is built on entertainment. And the electronic church apes the very things in the world the church has always condemned. The

electronic church inevitably comes through as a mere expression of cultural religion, aping the values and the glitter and the trappings of the very values and kinds of success that we profess as Christians to reject. People don't want to go. And the only churches that can compete with that one are large ones like ours. The little church really can't.

Martin Marty, who has a way with words, believe me, describes this electronic church phenomenon in this way. "Late Saturday night Mr. and Mrs. Invisible Religion get their jollies from the ruffle shirted, pink tuxedoed man and high coiffured, low-necklined celebrity women who talk about themselves under the guise of born-again autobiographies. Sunday morning the watchers get their jollies as Holy Ghost entertainers caress microphones among spurting fountains as a highly professional, charismatic leader entertains them.

"Are they to turn off that very set and then make their way down a block to a congregation of real believers, sinners, off-key choirs, sweaty and homely people, people they don't like but are supposed to love, ordinary pastors who preach grace along with calls to discipleship. Pleas for stewardship that don't come well-oiled. Never. Well, hardly ever. Since the electronic church, you remind me, at least preaches Christ and thus may do some good, let it be. Let its members pay for it, but let the church catch on to what is going on and go its own way, undistracted by the offers of cheap grace or the language of the cross without the bearing of the cross."

Pretty straightforward stuff. Let's live in the real world, people, huh? This is the real world in a real church. The church is so smug and so comfortable in its compromise with the world that it falls into the fantasy and then in verse 15 He says, "You have them there that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans." What happened in Pergamus? Pergamus decided they could waltz the world. Pergamus decided they could court the world. They could draw the world in a little bit and do a little of the world's thing in the world's way and allow some immorality in verse 15, and they'll be all right.

An elder told me that two elders and their wives exchanged wives in the church that he was in in the past. They thought they shouldn't do anything about that. It might upset the congregation. Church tolerates sin and sort of compromises a little. Oh the message is still the same, and we preach Christ and yet the compromise begins to eat away like termites at the foundation and so He says in verse 16, "Repent; or else I'll come unto thee quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth."

Listen. You know how Satan attacks a church? First it's very subtle. We lose our first love. And then all of a sudden we begin to compromise with the world because the easiest thing to lead you into compromise is a lack of love for God. If you really love God and you love the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, your desire above all things will be to maintain His absolute honor. Right? And to do that you can't compromise with the system. But as soon as you cool in your love, then it becomes easier to fall into the trap of the system. By the way, you're going to love something, and if it isn't God you'll wind up loving what's around you.

There's a third church that I want to mention to you. The church at Thyatira, verse 18. "Unto the angel in the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the son of God, who hath his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine bronze." He's searching, penetrating and coming in judgment and this sounds so good. "I know thy works, and love, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first." You're even getting better at this stuff.

Now here's a church that's really working. Boy, they're active, and they've really got it all going. If the church in Pergamus married the world, the church in Thyatira is celebrating their anniversaries. This is the church that tolerates sin. Ephesus lost their first love. Pergamus compromised with the world. Thyatira tolerant of sin. The floodgate was open and sin is there. Verse 20. In spite of all your works, all your love, all your service, all your faith and patience, and all this stuff, and that it's even increasing, "I have a few things" - by the way is not in the Greek manuscripts. "I have this against thee. Because thou allows that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce my servants to commit fornication, and eat things sacrificed unto idols."

You know what that church did? They had all those good things, love and service and faith, but they let the church become a victim of a false teacher. They just allowed sin to come in, have its heyday. There were people committing fornication. Sounds like the Corinthian church doesn't it? And by the way, that went out of existence too. But here came this woman and she was seducing and involving them in the idol worship of the day - and I've told you this before - but idolatry of those eras of history involved sexual activity, and so here were these people just having a great time, getting involved in the filth and the rot of the world.

You know, people, there's more of that going on in Grace Church than I think ever has in the past, but we're not going to tolerate it any more than we have in the past. It's a rare day when you have a couple come in for premarital counseling and you ask them "Have you gone to bed together?" and they say no. That's becoming a rare thing. Is that shocking to you? It's becoming a rare thing. This is a very vile and evil world we live in, and people are drawn into sin if they're not aware of what's going on and they don't build their defenses and walk in the Spirit. But I'll tell you, we're not going to tolerate it any differently than we ever tolerated it.

We have a lot more of evil around us by virtue of volumes of people, but our tolerance for it is no more existent than it ever has been. But this church began to allow it and God was even patient, verse 21: "I gave her space to repent." God even gave a little time for repentance "and she repented not." And then He says, "Behold I'll cast her into a bed." She likes beds so much, I'll put her in a bed. She wants to commit fornication, I'll put her into a fornicating situation. And verse 23 says it will be a bed of death. "I'll kill her children with death." That's what I'll do. Whoever those people are who have listened to this Jezebel are designated as her children, and He says, "I'll kill her children with death." It will be a bed of death. I'll put them in bed - death bed. And the churches will look and say "I am he

that searches the minds and hearts: and I'll give every one of you according to your works."

Listen, the Lord will judge this church, beloved. Don't you think you can be a believer and get away from God in His chastening. Not at all. The bed of vice will be exchanged for a death bed. Because they've committed adultery, they've committed adultery, verse 22 says. Why? Because the believer is married to Christ, and fooling around with idols and sexual activity is a form of adultery. I tell you, He says to the church that tolerates sin, "you better repent." You better turn around. And if you don't repent, end of verse 22, "I'll kill you with death."

Now for those of you who aren't involved, in verse 24 He says, "I'm not going to put any other burden on you. Just hang on to what you've got till I get there. But to those that are evil, I'm going to bring a judgment." Here is the church that tolerates sin. Beloved, there are so many churches that do this. They just don't want to deal with sin. They just don't want to confront anybody. They say, "You mean you discipline people in your church?" We do. Because the Bible says to. "Oh, we don't want to get into any of that because we might make…" You see tolerating sin. Compromising with the world.

And it just descends. You start with a loss of love, and then pretty soon when you don't love the Lord anymore you're willing to compromise. You compromise a little bit and pretty soon your compromise becomes a tolerance and sin floods the church and you go right from that kind of a situation in Thyatira into the next chapter. Verse 1, you're in the Sardis church and this is a church that is content with programs. All of a sudden the life is gone. A church that tolerates sin becomes a degenerate, dead church, and He says "I know thy works," verse 1, "that thou hast a name, that thou livest but are dead."

A dead church, a corpse. Do you know that Sardis was one of the greatest cities in the ancient world? In fact, its greatest king was named Croesus, and when we want to say somebody is really rich we say they're as rich as Croesus. That church, or rather that city, was literally synonymous with wealth. That city went out of existence. That church went out of existence. The church because it was a degenerate, dead church.

Just a few things kicking a little bit. Verse 2, "Be watchful. Strengthen the things that remain that are ready to die." They were either dead or ready to die. All they had left was form, like the rhyme of the ancient mariner, corpses man the ship, dead men pull the oars, and dead men steer the vessel. The thing was going, functioning - just everybody was dead.

This is when the church becomes a group of activities, a series or programs. You have your classes and you have your little groups and you have your activities for the kids and for the young people and for the adults, and everybody's very busy, and the fleet's rolling, and the people are coming. It's just that there's no life there. God's not there. "Ichabod" is written. The glory is departed.

And the sequence is easy to see. You lose the first love. A loss of that first, consuming, passionate love and you begin to compromise with the world. You compromise with the world and sin floods in and you begin to give in to sin and tolerate it, and when sin completely takes over the church, then the spiritual life is choked out and what you have is a dead church. Like Samson, you're moving around. You just don't have any strength. You're a victim.

And so He says in verse 3, "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." Oh, He says, there are "a few names in Sardis that have not defiled their garments and they shall walk with me in white for they are worthy." There were still a few. This church is just barely hanging on. A few things that are dying, and a few people that are left. Started in Ephesus, tremendous church; began to lose its first love, and now we're down - just a few are left and this is the way it goes. Few hanging on, whose garments are white; just a few.

You know the next step? The next step in the descent of the church comes as Satan attacks in his final blow in verse 14 of chapter 3, the church of Laodicea. Our Lord warns the church that leaves its first love, the church that compromises with the world, the church that tolerates sin, the church that is content with its forms and it's rituals and its organization and its programs, and lastly He warns the church that is the apostate church. The church that is no church at all, Laodicea.

"To the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hold: I would thou wert cold or hot." And what our Lord means there is this: cold means indifferent to the gospel, unsaved and not interested, just not even concerned. Not hypocritical. No pretense at all - unsaved, unmoved, uninterested.

I wish you were like that, or that you were hot, believing, saved, redeemed, but you are neither hot or cold. You are lukewarm and that is the worst of all. That is playing Christianity. That's the hypocrisy that nauseates Christ, and He says, "because you are lukewarm and neither cold or hot I'll spue you out of my mouth." The cold He preaches to through His messengers. The hot He embraces in His bosom. The lukewarm He spits out of His mouth. They are the hypocrites, and this is the hypocritical church, the phony church, the church that is no church.

And this is liberalism today. This is what we have in the world today, under the guise of Christianity, that deny the Bible, deny the deity of Jesus Christ, deny all of the great tenants of the Christian faith and yet say they are Christian churches. This is the church of the humanists, and when you ask them, "Tell me about your church," what they say is not, "Well we are seeing God's Word prevail. We are seeing people redeemed. We are seeing God touching lives."

No, they say, “I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing.” Look at us. We’re successful. We’ve got a big organization and we’ve got a lot of money. There are huge churches around the world, great denominations, massive religious systems, that fall under this category. They’ve got all the money and all the trappings and all of the paraphernalia but they are apostate and they will be spewed out of the Lord’s mouth.

He says to them in verse 17, “You don’t know that you’re wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked: and I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and the shame of thy nakedness does not appear; and anoint thine eyes with salve, that thou mayest see.” “That thou mayest see.” So He’s really saying to them, “I don’t think you’ve got your evaluation right.” And He says, “As many as I *phileo*” – as many as I *phileo*” – as many as I reach out to in deep concern, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”

Now do you see what our Lord Jesus Christ warns us about? The church can descend into the pit of apostasy. The church at Ephesus went out of existence because it lost its first love, and then a church so easily becomes a compromiser with the world. You know, sometimes it bothers me that people won’t come just to study the Word of God or just to pray. You’ve got to entertain people, you know, and I feel that. “Oh, you know, if we just had a big, huge production going on, everybody would be here.” But if we say we’re going to study the Word of God, you know, we get the faithful few. And so what the church does so many times is it begins to pick up on that tack, and we start entertaining the saints and aping the world, and that’s a compromise.

And then there’s the church that tolerated sin. The church that wed the world. The church that was satisfied with its material riches and really had nothing. The dead church. All of these things are Satan’s attacks. And beloved, there are preservatives here also. One is to be the Philadelphia church, this is the Philadelphia church, verse 7 of chapter 3, “these things saith he that is holy” - that hath – “he that is true, that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.”

Boy, I love that. He says, “I opened the door for you to reach the world. This is the door that’s wide open, and as long as the church is committed to go through that door and take Jesus Christ to the world, no matter what happens, even if the synagogue of Satan is there, even if the time of trouble comes, it isn’t going to affect the church.”

Listen, beloved. Evangelism is a preservative. It throws us out of ourselves. It helps us step beyond our inhibitions. It crucifies pride, and then there is that little church early in chapter 2, the Smyrna church: “I know thy works and tribulation in poverty, a poor troubled church.” They were being blasphemed. He says, “Don’t be afraid. The devil will cast some of you in prison that you may be

tried. You'll have tribulation ten days, but be faithful and I will give you a crown of life." Beloved, if we will be confrontive in the world and take what comes, and if we'll be aggressive to win people to Christ we can stand with Smyrna and Philadelphia and not fall into the trap of those other five churches. God help us to be warned as to how Satan attacks.

Let's pray. Father we know that judgment must begin at the house of God. Help us, Father, to be warned and aware. Lord, preserve this church for Your glory alone that it might be a continuing testimony to Your grace. We've seen so many churches around us die, so many fade away. Lord, that's not our desire at all. That doesn't bring You glory.

God help us to be faithful, to maintain that first love, never to compromise with the world, never to tolerate sin, never to substitute reality with form and program and function and organization, never to be filled up with those who are lukewarm pretenders. Help us to be real. Do Your work in our midst. As You move and trim those lamps, may ours be one that shines bright for Your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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