Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Ephesus: When Love Grows Cold
Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7
Code: 66-6

Tonight we embark upon the adventure of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapter 2 and 3, so you may now take your Bible and look with me to the second chapter of the great apokalupsis, the revelation of Jesus Christ. And we're going to consider the first of these seven letters to the seven churches, verses 1 through 7, the letter to the church in Ephesus.

You are well aware of the fact that this letter is known for the very singular statement that is made in verse 4, "But I have this against you that you have left your first love." And so we can fairly call this church the church that left its first love. Not necessarily in total but certainly in part, so much so that it was characterized in that way.

As we read this letter, we're going to come to grips with the matter of love growing cold in the lives of believers. And that leads me to say as a basic introduction that the reality of loving the Lord Jesus Christ is at the very core of a saving relationship to Him. We cannot spend as much time as I would like on that singular theme but if we were to collect all that has been said from this pulpit in the last 20-plus years, it would fill several volumes with regard to the matter of Christians loving the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just to touch base with that great reality, Matthew chapter 10 verse 37 and 38 put it in perspective. "He who loves father or mother more than Me, Jesus said, is not worthy of Me and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me."

In other words, being worthy of Christ means loving Him to the point where you are willing to take up your cross which means to die if need be because of the demands and the compulsions of that love. In John chapter 8 and verse 42 Jesus said, "If God were your Father, you would love Me." No more definitive statement is made in the New Testament than that. "If God is your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God."

Knowing God and being a Christian involves loving the Lord Jesus Christ. Again in John chapter 14 verse 21 says, Jesus is speaking again here, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." There the whole of the Christian relationship is summed up, God loves us, we love God and therefore we keep His commandments. Verse 23 similarly says, "If anyone loves

Me, he will keep My Word and My Father will love him and we will come to Him and make our abode with Him." If we were to turn that verse around and read it backwards, when God takes up His abode with us He loves us and we keep His Word because we love Him.

Jesus wanting to identify the spiritual condition of Peter in John 21 asked him three times the same question...Peter, do you...what?...love Me? Therein is the substance of spiritual identity manifest. Those who are Christians love the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 and verse 22 it says, "If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed." People who love Christ are the saved and the blessed. People who do not love Christ are the accursed, the damned. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 1:8 that we love Him even though we've never seen Him.

So that love for the Lord Jesus Christ is present in all Christians. But it is subject to fluctuation as to intensity. All Christians love the Lord Jesus Christ. All Christians do not love the Lord Jesus Christ with all their heart, soul, mind and strength as they ought to. There is unquestionably a fluctuation potential in that love relationship. And no better illustration of the seriousness of a waning intensity of love than this letter to the church at Ephesus.

Let me read it to you. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The one who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands says this, I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance and that you cannot endure evil men and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles and they are not and you found them to be false, and you have perseverance and have endured for my namesake and have not grown weary, but I have this against you that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen and repent and do the deeds you did at first or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate. He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to him who overcomes I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God."

Now let me remind you that this is a letter to a church, a real church in a real city called Ephesus in Asia Minor. I want you to remember that when we deal with these churches in these two chapters of Revelation, we're dealing with real churches, historical churches. And the Lord is writing a letter that applies at that period of time to that church. But also, these are not only historical churches, they are perennial churches in the sense that each of these churches is a little bit different type church, has a little bit different characteristic, is a little bit unique from all the others. And so they represent the types of churches that perennially exist throughout the church age. We are dealing then with a real historical church but we are also dealing with a perennial problem in churches and that is in the case of the Ephesian church there are plenty of churches throughout all of church history that could be characterized as those who had grown cold in the matter of their love for Christ.

We also mentioned to you last time that these churches, for the most part, at least five out of seven of them, have evil mixed with good. It is not uncommon for churches to have those kinds of characteristics. There will be a mixture of good and evil. And we also noted that as you flow through the seven letters with the exception of the two churches where there is no evil mentioned, the church in Smyrna an the church in Philadelphia which seem to be good churches on a total level, with the exception of that the five churches that have the mixture of good and evil are on a descending scale. In other words, they become progressively worse. So you have here historical churches which had problems that needed to be dealt with that are perennial illustrations of types of churches in all periods of time that also illustrate that churches can be a mixture of good and evil and we also see a descending kind of disastrous scale as you move from the first church to the last church. The first having grown cold with love, the last being totally apostate.

So what we learn here then is relevant to all churches in all times. And frankly, any church in any age of the church could have a mixture of these problems characterizing it.

We're going to look at these letters one at a time and I believe the Holy Spirit has put them here because they are so perennially relevant. They can speak to churches today that have these characteristics and they can warn all of us about the potential of these characteristics in our own church.

Now the first church then to which a letter is addressed is Ephesus. It is one of seven churches in the province of Asia Minor, today you would know that as modern Turkey, that's the area. The Ephesian church was perhaps the most prominent one since all the other six were founded as daughter churches out of the Ephesian church and the Ephesian church was founded really by the extensive ministry of the Apostle Paul which lasted something around three years or more. Forty years before this letter was written, Paul had written the letter of Ephesians which, of course, reached them among other churches. Forty years later you have the Holy Spirit giving to John this letter which reveals the very words of Jesus Christ to that same church. So we could say that the church in Ephesus receives two letters, the letter of Ephesians from Paul and the letter here from the Lord Jesus Christ through the pen of the Apostle John.

Now as we look at these letters, we're going to see some pretty typical features in all of them and the outline will flow pretty much the same as we look through them. First of all, let's look at the correspondent...the correspondent. Who is the writer? Who is the writer? He is not named by name but it is very evident who He is. This letter is sent to the angel of the church in Ephesus. Just to note, the angel refers to the leader of the church. We have no reason to assume that it refers to an actual angel, although that it is a possibility. The weight of evidence for that viewpoint is that every other mention of angels in the book of Revelation refers to actual angels. The word angelos can also mean messenger. So there are some who would say that this is a letter given to a certain angel who is associated with each of these churches. The problem with that is we have no such teaching about

angels being associated with churches and we have no word of Scripture ever given to angels...they are always given to men and the word can mean leader. And since we don't get to the futuristic part of the book until the third chapter, there is every reason to assume that the word angelos here means simply messenger which would be a representative from the Ephesian church, one of its leaders who had come to be with John perhaps on the Isle of Patmos and was bearing this very letter back on behalf of John and the Lord Himself to the church in Ephesus.

But the one who writes the letter is really not John. He may be the emanuensus, the one whose pen moves as it were on the scroll, but the one who writes, verse 1 says, is the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands. He is the one who says this. And we know from our study of chapter 1 and the vision that flows down through the chapter from verse 9 on that this is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who holds the seven stars in His right hand and He is the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands. Verse 20 of chapter 1 says, "The seven golden lampstands are the churches and the seven stars are the messengers of those churches." So it is the Lord who controls the leadership. It is the Lord who controls and cares for and ministers to and moves among the churches who is saying this.

And it is a fascinating thing to note that if you'll study the vision in chapter 1 from verse 12 on, you will see the characteristics of Christ in that vision are used to identify the writer of these letters. Here you can see He is spoken of in chapter 1 verse 20 as the one who has the stars and who moves among the lampstands. And that's the way he's identified to Ephesus. Look at verse 8 just to see how this flows...in verse 8 it says, here is a second letter to the church in Smyrna, and the writer is the first and the last who was dead and has come to life. And that is the designation of Christ in chapter 1 verse 18.

If you go down to verse 12 to the church at Pergamus, or Pergamum, the one writing is the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. And again that is the description of Christ in chapter 1 verse 16. If you go down to chapter 2 verse 18, the Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire, His feet are like burnished bronze, says this, and that is the description of Christ in chapter 1 verse 15. You go to chapter 3 verse 1 and He is the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars and again He is noted in that way in the vision in chapter 1 verse 16 holding the seven stars.

And so you see that the description of Christ in chapter 1 is carried out through these letters for the purpose of identifying the very one described in chapter 1 as the one who moves through the church. Also even in reference to the church at Philadelphia He is noted as the one who has the key of David who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens and again He is noted as one who has different keys, chapter 1 verse 18, the keys of death and hell, but you can be sure that on His belt hang all the keys. And so the identification of the writer is simply to reiterate the very one described in the vision of chapter 1, the Lord Jesus Christ. These are letters directly from Christ to the churches. He walks among the golden lampstands. What does it mean? Scrutinizing, examining,

looking, seeing, assessing, evaluating and then He puts down, as it were, the pen of John and begins to dictate the message to every church based upon what He sees as He listens to them and as He watches them. So the one in charge of the church is about to write, our head, the Lord Jesus Christ, He is the correspondent, He is the one who actually writes the letter.

Secondly, we want to note the church...the correspondent and then the church. And again I remind you in verse 1 it says to the leader, the messenger of the church in Ephesus. I don't want to spend a lot of time dealing with the details of the founding of the church, you can go back in the book of Acts and read it yourself. But this was a spiritually strong church founded and taught, of course, by the Apostle Paul and other Apostles who followed him, located in the unique city of Ephesus. It is...it is probably true that even before Paul did the yeoman work of giving form to the church that Aquila and Priscilla who had been left there by Paul did some preliminary foundation work. You'll find that in Acts 18:21. So they were initially under the influence of Aquila and Priscilla, also influenced by that powerful Old Testament preacher by the name of Apollos who came there to Ephesus from Alexandria. When he got there the only thing he knew was the baptism of John, John the Baptist, he didn't yet know about the Messiah Christ, and so Aquila and Priscilla, you remember, according to Acts 18:25 and 26 taught him more perfectly the gospel and so he must then have articulated with his great gifts the meaning of Old Testament truth in the light of the gospel which he had learned. So before Paul even really did the...the work himself, Aquila, Priscilla and Apollos had had some influence on that church.

Paul, first of all, met people from Ephesus, you remember, when he met on his third journey a group of believers in John the Baptist who had only known the baptism of John, Acts 19. He gave them the gospel, baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in Acts 19:5. And that really began Paul's direct work in building the Ephesian church. And he was there for three years, according to Acts 20:31. So they had some very strong beginnings with some very wonderful and godly and powerful people. Paul not only was there for the period of time three years, but he also came back at a later time and was instrumental on his way to Jerusalem in stopping there to give a final course in church management to the elders recorded in Acts chapter 20. It is also true that Timothy served that church and a very well-known person to the Colossians, Tychicus served there also. And I want to happily add, so did the Apostle John. John was no doubt the leading elder in the church at Ephesus when he was arrested by Domitian and exiled sixty miles away from there to the Isle of Patmos, that rock in the middle of the Mediterranean where he was when the Spirit of God revealed all of this to him.

So, you talk about a church that had some powerful influence, you're talking about the Ephesian church. The list of the greatest had been through there to influence that church. The beginnings of that church in terms of its identity as a church really are brought to us in Acts 19, and I don't want to belabor the point but you need to understand that if you read Acts 19 you're going to see some wonderful and remarkable things happen as God begins to put that church together.

For example, in chapter 19 verse 8, Paul entered the synagogue, continued speaking boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the Kingdom of God. And when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the way before the multitude, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years so that all who lived in Asia heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. I mean, this thing was so effective it went out of Ephesus, spread all over Asia during those two years and resulted in the founding of the other churches of Asia Minor to which the letters in Revelation 2 and 3 are also addressed.

Verse 11, "God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, hankerchiefs and aprons were carried from his body to the sick and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out." There were some Jewish exorcists who went around from place to place attempting to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus saying, "I adjure by Jesus whom Paul preaches." And seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest were doing this and the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus and I know about Paul, but who are you guys?" In other words, what are you doing using the name of Jesus? Even the demons know who belongs in the kingdom and who doesn't.

So there were some pretty dramatic things happening in this beginning time of the Ephesian church. We find in verse 18, "Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices, their evil practices, demonic practices, their occultic practices. Many of those who practiced magic...verse 19...brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver." Listen, there are accountants in every audience and they'll count and they were counting...fifty thousand dollars worth of books are going up in smoke because these people are turning from magic to Christ.

This, of course, threw the entire city into chaos because the city was deeply involved in idol worship. Verse 23 says, "About that time there arose no small disturbance concerning the way." Why? Because it was hurting the business of the idol makers. "And so the city...verse 29...was filled with confusion. They rushed with one accord into the theater dragging Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia." And so it goes. A riot ensued. You can read it yourself.

This church was born in an unbelievable time. Miracles, powerful preaching, the Word spread, other churches were founded, people turning from idols, turning from the occult, magic, evil practices, burning their magic books at a tremendous price, putting the idol makers who made the silver gods out of business, creating a riot in the city when the union of idol workers found out about it...this is a remarkable place. And so this church was born in a great revival.

But by now Paul is gone. In fact, it's been about 40 years since he wrote the letter to the Ephesians. And there's a new letter coming to him and the one who brings it really is John, the one who writes it is Christ.

Thirdly, we come to the city. And we need to say a word about Ephesus, it's quite a place. Pergamus was the official capital of the province of Asia Minor. And we'll find out about Pergamus in a minute...in a week, I think, next...two weeks actually, two weeks from now we'll look at that letter. Pergamus was the actual capital city but Ephesus was by far the greatest city. In fact, a Roman writer called it, "Luminasia, the Light of Asia." It was prominent for a number of reasons and I want to run them by you briefly just to give you a feeling, you don't have to remember every detail.

It had the greatest harbor in Asia Minor. And any time a city had a harbor, that was the influx and the outgo, that was the trade center, that was the metropolis. It stood not only on the sea but it stood on the mouth of the Cayster River and the Cayster River flooded into this harbor. It was a sort of an inland city about three miles from the sea actually, but the broad mouth of the river allowed access. Even now when John is writing, however, the silt from the Cayster River is beginning to stop up the harbor. And they've had to leave some lanes where the ships can come and go. If you go there now and see the ruins of Ephesus, it is six miles from any water, from the sea because the silt deposit of the Cayster River literally filled it up completely. But in those days there was still access and it was the primary harbor for Asia Minor. Ships would come up that river through a man-made canal into a turning basic, dock within the city, turn around and go back out.

There were also four great roads that went in to Ephesus. One came from the north, from Pergamus and Smyrna. One came from the northeast from Sardis, Galatia, Phrygia. One came from the southeast, the great trade route from the Euphrates through Colossae and Laodicea into Ephesus. Another came from the south from the rich Meander(?) Valley. Consequently Ephesus became known as the marketplace of Asia or the gateway to Asia. It was a very very important place.

In later times when the martyrs were brought from Asia to be thrown to the lions in the arena in Rome, they would come through Ephesus on the highway and it became known as the Highway of the Martyrs. Its position made it sort of a vanity fair for the ancient world.

Politically it was a free city, that it was self-governing. Rome gave Ephesus the right of self-governing, no Roman troups were stationed there at all. Great games were conducted there. The Ephesian Games, and they rivaled the Olympic Games. Some writers say the whole pageant of Greco-Roman life could be seen in its most brilliant colors in the city of Ephesus...athletic contests, drama. In fact, there's a massive theater in the ruins there. From the harbor this great promenade ran right to that theater. They were big in drama, pageantry. There were sacrifices given there as well in a religious fashion.

In fact, it may well be when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:8 that he doesn't want to leave Ephesus, it's a great door, an effectual open and a wonderful opportunity and he's going to remain in Ephesus...it may well be because he was waiting for the month of May. In the month of May the Ephesian Games took place and pilgrims from all over the ancient world would descend into Ephesus and it would be the greatest evangelistic outreach opportunity of the year...and that may have been the reason he said he wanted to stay there, because of that opportunity. Although we have no indication that he actually was able to remain that long.

Most importantly perhaps for us is the religious aspect of it. It was the center of the worship of Artemis...Artemis being a Greek name, the Roman name Diana. It again indicates this confusion because Artemis appears to be a male kind of name and even sometimes male figure, and Diana a more decidedly female figure but you find in ancient ritualistic religions and occult kind of religions, Babylonian Mystery Cults, the male/female identity of gods is switched all the time as a part of Satan's ploy to mingle and confuse sexual identities. But the place of the worship of Diana was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. I doubt if I gave you a quiz that...you've heard about them but...you could name them all...so let me run them by you.

One of them was in Alexandria, the Pharos Lighthouse. Another was near Cairo, the pyramids. Another was in Babylon, the hanging gardens. Another was in Halicarnassus, the tomb of King Masolus(?). Another was the Colossus at Rhodes. Another was the statue of Zeus at Mount Olympus. And the seventh of them was this amazing temple in Ephesus to Diana. It was made of glittering Persian marble. According to archaeologists, 425 feet long which would be about one and a half blocks, 260 feet wide, columns stood 60 feet high, 130 columns, 37 embellished with gold and jewels that had been given by kings and embedded in the marble. The altar was beautiful beyond words, carved by Praxittiles(??) who was the famous Greek sculptor. This temple was a museum, collections from all over the world. It was a sanctuary for criminals. All the criminals who wanted to escape and cross their fingers and say "King's X, you can't touch me," got in this temple. So you can imagine the kind of riff raff that lived there.

It was the bank of the Mediterranean which makes it convenient for the criminals. The wealthy kept their treasures there in the inner shrine. Supposedly no one was allowed to violate it but it was a place of unbelievable graft and confusion and chaos. It was big business also. They sold little gods. They sold gods for your neck. This is the first place we find little idols to put on the front of your chariot. The Roman Catholic Church, by the way, and you need to know this historically, the Roman Catholic Church has taken its forms of worship not from historic Christianity but from historic idolatrous worship out of the Roman world. That's where they get their hollidays, their pilgrimages, their temples with craftsman selling images, their medallions, that's all taken from the pagan world, much like was going on in Ephesus. That's where the gods and goddesses were that they now call saints.

The worship of Diana itself was frankly beyond description. The very idol itself was a big ugly black cow-like buffalo-shaped thing with paps hanging down from it...not some beautiful goddess Diana that you might assume looks like a contemporary model or movie star...not at all. This was an ugly beast who was supposed to suckle people and give them spiritual life. But the worship itself was beyond description. There were scores of eunuchs who had been castrated for the purposes of serving this god or goddess. There were thousands of priestesses who were nothing but prostitutes who believed that in sexual orgies they could live the worshiper up into the presence of the deities. There were unnumbered heralds, those who proclaimed. There were singers, there were flutists, there were dancers. And just...you can imagine the chaos in this temple...people doing banking, criminals trying to find asylum, people trying to look at the museum pieces, worship going on, prostitution, music, feasts, festivals and the whole hysteria became a frenzy of shameless sexual mutilation. Heraclitus says, "The morals of the temple were worse than the morals of animals, for even dogs do not mutilate each other." And he said, "The people there were fit only to be drowned."

Now this is a messy town with a messy centerpiece. Huddled in the middle of this is a church...a church. And you can understand when the church was born in the middle of all of that why it became a very very significant sore spot and why persecution broke out. The preaching of Jesus Christ by Paul had affected the worship of Diana, affected the idol sales, it dropped off so seriously that that precipitated the riot of Acts 19. This is the beginning of the little flock at Ephesus. No wonder God gave them Aquila, Priscilla, Apollos, Paul, no wonder God gave them Tychicus, Timothy, no wonder God now even gave them John. This was a very very wicked city.

That brings us to a fourth consideration and takes us actually into the letter...the commendation...the commendation. It is the pattern of these letters that Christ first of all gives a commendation, then a condemnation. It's almost as if He sets them up and then sort of knocks them off. Verse 2, "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance." I know your deeds, He says, a general statement which includes all that follows and He recites them, "Your toil, perseverance, you can't endure evil men, you put to the test those who call themselves apostles and they are not and you found them to be false, your perseverance, you've endured for My namesake, you haven't grown weary." Then verse 6, "This you do have, you hate the deeds of Nicolaitans which I also hate."

There is the commendation. First of all, notice He says, "I know your deeds, or your work, your labor." The risen Christ is praising them for kopos, which means labor to the point of sweat and exhaustion. You work hard, you labor to the point of weariness. This is the kind of toil which takes everything of mind and muscle that a man or a woman can put into it. Their labor for Christ was with major effort. They were toilers. He said, "I know that. I know you're busy toiling for Christ." They weren't the kind of Christians who wanted the box seats. They weren't the kind of Christians who wanted to be entertained. They wanted to be involved. They didn't want to just eat the fruit of the harvest, they were willing to plow, plant and do the harvest. They were teaching, sharing Christ,

planting, helping people in need. They were aggressive, they were active.

Secondly He says, "I know your perseverance." Again that word hupomone, I know your endurance, I know your patience. Not a grim resignation but again that courageous gallantry which accepts hardship, suffering, loss and turns it in to grace and glory. You're sticking with it, you're staying with it, you're persisting even though they were chewed up and beaten down and cast out, they endured it. They remained faithful. They hung on.

Thirdly he says, "I know you cannot endure evil men. I know your suppression of evil." You are intolerant of sin, that's what he's saying. You still have a holy standard. They were characterized by service, steadfastness and sanctification, we could say. They had not lost their sensitivity to sin. You cannot endure evil men. They were probably engaged in church discipline.

Paul had told them when he wrote his letter in Ephesians 4:27, "Neither give place to the devil," and they hadn't. They really hadn't. They resented evil. And they resented evil doers. Please notice, he doesn't say you can't endure evil, he says you can't endure evil men. And I remind you that neither can God. Sometimes you hear people in a well-meaning fashion say something like, "God hates the sin but loves...what?...the sinner." Well you have to be careful about that because in Psalm 5:5 it says, "Thou dost hate all who do iniquity." God not only hates the sin but God hates the sinner. "Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated." And this church not only hated the sin but they had a holy version to the sinner, for he is inextricably bound up in his sin. God, of course, also loves the sinner and that's the wondrous balance of it.

They hated all that was morally bad. They hated the people that were morally bad with a holy righteous hatred. And they knew that a little leaven would leaven the whole lump. And so obviously their hatred of evil men caused them to keep evil men out.

You remember, Paul once warned them about this on that trip to Jerusalem when he stopped to meet the elders. He gave them a warning. He said to them in Acts 20, and this warning, I suppose, could have been given to any church in the New Testament or any church today. But he says to them this in Acts chapter 20 verse 29, "After my departure, savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert." And he said for three years night and day with tears I have been warning you. That didn't go without good results. Three years of warning night and day, you're going to get it, they're going to come from inside, they're going to come from outside, evil men, perverse men, seducing you. And here we are 40 years later and they are still hanging in there and they're still hating evil and evil men. They took the word from Paul and they applied it. And here is a whole new generation still faithful to that kind of aversion to evil.

Fourthly, they had another component, "They were characterized by spiritual discernment. You put to the test those who call themselves apostles and they are not and you found them to be false." You put them to a test and the test must have the right test because it gave the right conclusion. You have known by your doctrine how to evaluate somebody who says he's a teacher. Many an evil man has come into a little congregation and sown error and that error has ripped and torn a church to shreds.

Jesus warned about false prophets. As I just read in Acts 20, Paul warned about them. And here is this church 40 years later and it still has solid doctrine and it still knows how to evaluate a teacher and how to put him to the test. Surely they got all kinds of evil men coming in and teaching falsely. Surely they got all kinds of false apostles, as they are called here, who came in, emissaries of legalism, or emissaries of libertinism, or emissaries of ritualism, or emissaries of professionalism. But they had the standard of sound doctrine and they measured them and their measurements were correct and so they made the right evaluation.

Only those teachers were welcome who were faithful and true to the Word of God. And that's the way it has to be. The Ephesians knew it and they lived by it. They put to the test those who called themselves apostles and they are not and you found them to be false.

They were dealing with some heavy-duty folks. They were literally claiming to be apostles and they were false. And the church today must measure people who make such claims with the same standard Ephesus did to come to the same result.

Verse 3, he further adds, "And you have perseverance and have endured for My namesake and have not grown weary." Through all of this, through your service, through the difficulties, through the evil and sin, through the false apostles that have come and gone, you have remained faithful...you have endured it all. And look please, you have endured it for the right reason, for My namesake...you've done it for Me. Here is, beloved, still a pure motive. You've done it for me. You are spiritual marathoners. For all these years, at least 40, you fought the battle, you've stayed true and you've done it for me. And I love this at the end of verse 3, "And have not grown weary." You remember Galatians 6:9 where Paul reminds the Galatians, "Do not grow weary in well ddoing." You can, you know, from disappointment, ingratitude, criticism, rebellion, lack of response, but they hadn't. Faithful to the Word, faithful to the work, faithful to the Lord, faithful to the criteria by which you judge people and in it all through the spiritual discernment, through the trouble, through all of it, they had never grown weary and always with the right motive...for Thy namesake. That means for your glory, for your honor, for your name, fr your reputation, not ours. This is a marvelous church. This is a great church.

Go now to verse 6 where we pick up the final note about the commendation. He says, "Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate." After having indicted them a bit in verses 4 and 5 seriously, he now comes back to commend them again as if to in some way acknowledge to them that what he has just said is not an indication that they are wholesale in a disastrous condition...so he circles back here and picks up another thing for which they are to be commended. They hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate.

Now this poses to us a problem and I'm not going to try to forever and always solve the problem, but help you to understand it. There is no way that we can dogmatically identify the Nicolaitans. We can make some assumptions and I'll try to make some that might help you. We want to ask, what is the deeds of the Nicolaitans? What are the deeds of the Nicolaitans? What were they doing? What was their doctrine? What was their error? What were they all about?

There are a number of possibilities. But we find this heresy in another location. The letter to the church at Pergamus down in chapter 2 verse 12, we find it again...verse 15, please notice verse 15, "Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans." What do you mean the same way? Go back to verse 14, "I have a few things against you because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality." Balaam we understand...right? Back to Numbers 22 and following, Balaam came along and seduced God's people into idolatry, seduced God's people into immorality. He posed as a prophet which he was and he came along and instead of leading people to godliness, he led them to sin, to idolatry and to immorality...that's what Balaam did.

Verse 15 then, "Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans." It seems to me that whatever Balaam did, the same thing was being done by the Nicolaitans. Let me take it a step further. The word "Nicolas" comes from two Greek words, nike from which you get the word today Nike which means to conquer and the word laos, the word means conqueror of the people, one who conquers the people. Listen to this, the Hebrew word Balaam means destroyer of the people...the Hebrew word Balaam means destroyer of the people. What you have here with Nicolas in the New Testament appears to be the same as you had with Balaam in the Old Testament. This is someone who by false teaching leads people into destructive sin. How in the world this could ever be allowed in the church as it was in Pergamus is shocking but here in Ephesus it was not allowed. They could spot a Nicolaitan because they could test the false, their criteria was still intact.

Furthermore, one of the deacons named in Acts 6 is Nicolas. Some early church writers, namely Iranaeus, say that it is this Nicolas who appeared early in the church, was made a deacon but who was a false believer. Went bad, became an apostate but because of his credential as a one-time deacon was allowed to come in and lead the church astray. And he was no different than a Balaam, he was a destroyer of the people just like Balaam was and he led them in to immorality and

wickedness.

So that's probably the best guess at who these people were. For sure we know that those who followed Nicolas were involved in immorality and uncleanness and they plied the church with sensual temptations. Clement of Alexander says, "They abandoned themselves to pleasure like goats, leading a life of self- indulgence." They were involved in immorality, loose living. Liberty was replaced with license. They were involved in teaching perverted grace. They were probably a pre-gnostic group thinking that through their sexual activity and their superior knowledge they had ascended to the deities. They may even have perpetrated on the church a classical hierarchical structure which found its final form in Catholicism. But whatever, verse 6 says Christ hates them...I hate what they do and so do you.

Now the sum of all this commendation is, this is a noble bunch and I don't want you to underestimate that, this is a great church. I don't want to be so bold as to say this for certain, but of all the churches in these two chapters, this one seems to me more like ours...hard working, toiling for the Kingdom, persevering through difficulty, unable to endure evil men and acting in behalf of holiness and virtue and righteousness and putting church discipline into action, able to recognize false apostles, not being victimized by those who come along no matter who they are and advocate ungodly licentious, wicked, evil living, a church of great character.

Fifthly, we come to the concern. What could be wrong in a church like this? Verse 4, "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love."

Let me tell you something, folks, I don't mind some people having something against our church but when the Lord has something against your church, that's serious...that's serious. When it's the Lord who says, "I have something against you," it's time to shake. Such beautiful commendations but they missed the most important thing. Jesus said to Peter three times, "Do you...what?...love Me?" The most important thing. And when they read this, I believe when they read this in Ephesus it probably hit them like a thunder bolt, it probably shocked them because all those congratulations and then they are blasted with this and I doubt that they ever even realized it. What had happened? This is one of the best churches, if not the best church...yet the clear penetrating spiritual laser vision of Christ found a fatal fault that probably nobody else saw. Their hard hearts, that labor of passion and fervor was becoming the cold orthodox function. That was deadly, dangerous. The service had started to become mechanical.

Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 2, "The Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem saying, Thus says the Lord, I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following after Me in the wilderness through a land not sown." Israel was holy to the Lord, the first of His harvest. I remember, God says, I remember the way it used to be.

But then the Lord says, "What injustice did your fathers find in Me that they went far from Me?" I remember how it used to be and it isn't that way anymore. This is nothing new, this happened to Israel. In Ezekiel 16, a powerful Scripture, Ezekiel 16 verse 8, "Then I passed by you and saw you...God speaking to Israel...behold, you were at the time for love, you were ripe for love so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine." What is He saying? I married you, you were in a season of love and I found you and I took you and I embraced you and I married you. And I bathed you with water and I washed off your blood from you, anointed you with oil and I clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk, and I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck and I put a ring in your nostril and earrings in your ears and a crown, a beautiful crown on your head. And thus you were adorned with gold and silver and your dress was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey and oil, so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.

Listen to this, "But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot." I remember the time of your beauty, I remember the time of your love. I remember the time of your betrothal, I remember...God said to Israel. This is exactly what He's saying here. The honeymoon ended in Israel, the honeymoon ended in Ephesus. You don't love Me like you once loved Me. Your love has cooled. That, beloved, is the forerunner of spiritual apathy. That is the forerunner of indifference. And that is the greatest fear that I have for this church for that is step one that moves you through the rest of the steps that you see in these churches into a love for the world, compromise with evil, corruption, death and judgment. Doctrinal yes, solid. Morally pure, yes. Zealous, yes. Disciplined yes. Hard-working yes. Born in an incredible way out of powerful pagan idolatry with the best spiritual leadership. Fanatical start and now grown cold.

How would you like it, ladies, if your husband came to you some time and said, "I don't love you anymore but nothing will change?" Is that enough? "I'll still earn a living, I'll still eat with you, sleep with you, drive with you, I'll still father the children and be your husband. Nothing will change, I just don't love you." Devastating. How would you feel if your wife came to you and said, "I don't love you but nothing will change?"

In a sense we couldn't imagine saying that to the Lord. "Lord, I don't love You like I once did, that's gone. But I just want You to know I'll still come, I'll still work, I'll still sing, I'll still give, I'll still even believe the truth, I just don't love You." We wouldn't say that but the Lord knows if it's true.

The correspondent, the church, the city, the commendation, the concern, sixthly, the command. The command, verse 5, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen." You've got to go back and

remember. You want to know something? One of the reasons...I'm revealing an inside secret here...one of the reasons we have baptism services in this church every Sunday night is so you will not easily forget how it was when you were first saved. How do you remember? By hearing again and again and again and again the exhilarating joy and testimony of transformation. We don't...we don't do this just for the sake of these folks, that is not all God had in mind when He designed it. We do it for the sake of you folks who having moved a long way in time from your conversion could perhaps easily forget the first love but are brought Sunday after Sunday after Sunday after Sunday face to face again with first love. You need to remember that. And it needs to remind you of how it was with you when you first passed out of darkness into light. Remember from where you have fallen. Go back and remember how it used to be.

So often spiritual declension comes from forgetting. This is a new generation in Ephesus. The first generation, for the most part, is gone. They still had the strong tradition but not the intense love. That's why I have said so many times that a church if it's going to stay vital in its love for Christ has to be a maternity ward where there's the constant cry of newborn babes in Christ. Why? Because they continually bring us in to touch with first love. That's absolutely crucial. You always want to have a large first generation of believers in your church. Remember, that's where it starts, remember.

Secondly, repent because to lose your first love is sin. The decreasing intensity of your love for Christ is sin. Lack of loving Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is sin. Repent, get on your knees before God and ask Him to forgive you for that weakening love.

Remember, repent...third word, repeat. Do the deeds you did at first. I was talking to Mal Hankenson(?) last night after the basketball game. We were talking about the Scripture. And he was telling me how that when he became a Christian he said I committed my life to Jesus Christ and he said...I started to read the Bible and I read the whole Bible in a month. And I read it again, and I read it again, and I kept reading it and I kept reading it. And people would say to me, "What's wrong with you? What's gotten into you?" And he was describing that passion, that hunger for the Word of God. And then it was such a wonderful thing, he said to me, "And I want you to know that I'm going through the book of Romans with you right now, years later in my Christian life and I listen to ten tapes a week over and over until I comprehend the truth." And he said, "I've listened to 50 so far and you're only in chapter 8." And you know what my heart was saying? I rejoice, the first love is there. That's how it was when you first fell in love.

And you see people who come to Christ, fall in love with Christ, as it were, and they want to serve and they want to tell their friends, and they want to teach, they want to pass on what they know. They want to sing. They want to pray. Those are the first things. Go back. If you once taught but you don't teach, if you once prayed with folks but you don't pray, if you always used to come on Sunday nights and now you come very rarely, if you always went to Bible study and were a part of a fellowship group and you went to every opportunity to be trained, but you don't do that

anymore...that's an evidence of the loss of first love, that's a sin. Remember how it was, repent before God and repeat the things you used to do.

This is pretty serious. Look back at verse 5, "Or else," or else what? "Or else I'm coming to you." Oh, you say, that will be fine, I'm waiting for the Second Coming. No, this isn't the coming you're waiting for. He says, "Or else I'm coming to you and I'll remove your lampstand out of its place unless you repent." I'll come and I'll take away your lampstand. That's what He says to Ephesus. You're a great church, you have a great reputation, you have a great ministry. If you don't change you're going to have nothing...you're going to have nothing. I'm going to come and it's over.

Whew....unless you repent, I'm going to remove the lampstand. The lampstand represents the church. I'm going to take the church right out, your church will be gone, your church will be terminated. Did it happen? Yes. That's the sad part. Yes, today there's no city, there's no church. Ephesus is a bleak reminder, a bleak reminder of a church that didn't heed the letter and the light went somewhere else.

And then one final note, the counsel. Each letter closes with some counsel...verse 7 is that counsel. The counsel takes shape in two ways...first an invitation and then a promise. The invitation, "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," which is God's way of saying you better listen. And, by the way, you will find that at the end of each letter, all seven...you better listen, I'm not kidding, this is serious, please listen. I'm looking at your church, I'm analyzing it. I'm telling you what its problem is. I'm telling you what the solution is, please listen. That's the invitation.

And then the promise, "To him who overcomes I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God." That's the promise. To whom is this addressed? To him who overcomes. You're going to find that phrase repeatedly through these letters...to him who overcomes...you see it in verse 11, you see it in verse 17...to him who overcomes...common, down in verse 26. And it always refers to the same person. You know who it is? Believers. It's just a reference to believers. People have done all kinds of gymnastics to try to figure out what this means, it just means Christians. You say, "How do you know that?" First John 5...1 John 5, same writer John, "For whatever is born of God overcomes." Whatever is born of God overcomes the world and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith and who is the one who overcomes the world? He who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. That's John's own definition of his own term that he writes on behalf of Christ. An overcomer is a Christian. To you true believers, he says, to you true Christians, I want to give you a promise.

Isn't it wonderful? He's commended them in the beginning. He's hit them with a bullseye, a jolt about their sin. He's told them to listen and He closes by saying, "Because they are true Christians let me leave with a promise." It's like signing the letter with a whole lot of hope. To you overcomers, you true believers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God. That's another way

of saying I promise you...what?...heaven. I promise you heaven.

The overcomer in the book of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, is contrasted with the cowardly, in chapter 2:10 and 13. The overcomer is contrasted with the sexually immoral, chapter 2 verses 14 and 20. The overcomer is contrasted with the idolaters of chapter 2 verse 14 and 20, the liars of chapter 2 verses 2 and 9 and 20, chapter 3 verse 9. The overcomer is the true believer.

In chapter 21 of Revelation verse 8, "For the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone." Those people that are identified in chapters 2 and 3 are assigned to hell in chapter 8 and they are in contrast to the overcomer who has the promise of heaven. There's no question who the overcomer is. It's not some second-level kind of Christianity, this is a definition of a true Christian. To this person, I will grant to eat of the tree of life. The tree of life is first mentioned in Genesis 2:9, the source of life God put in the Garden. It is mentioned lastly in Revelation 22 verse 19, right at the very end, the Lord is going to give us the tree of life and not take it away but He will take it away from those who tamper with His truth. The tree of life in the Garden was on earth, the tree of life in the book of Revelation is that eternal glorious tree that speaks of life in heaven. In fact, you could see in Revelation 22 verse 2 a description of that tree, it had 12 kinds of fruit yielding its fruit every month and the leaves of the tree were for the health of the nations. Not because we're sick but it speaks of vigor and wholeness and prosperity and eternal health.

And where is it? In the paradise of God which is John's way of speaking about heaven. So He ends with a promise.

Now what should we learn from this lesson? Be certain you're a true Christian and overcomer headed for heaven. Two, be certain you maintain your first love. Very practical.

Father, thank You for our time tonight in Your Word. We thank You, Father, that we're a church that has known Your blessing. And, Lord, we would never want to leave our first love, we don't ever want to say to You...I don't love You like I did but nothing will change," and then carry out mechanical functions. Lord, make us faithful to love for Christ's sake. Amen.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2013 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).