

**WILL YOUR LOVE GROW COLD?**  
**Jesus' Concerns for His Church**  
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I encourage you to open your Bible to Revelation 2:1-7. Today I begin a new series, which will take us, Lord willing, through the next two months where we will be in Revelation 2 and 3 and deal with the theme of Jesus' concerns for his church.

We have in Revelation 2 and 3 seven letters that Jesus addressed through the Apostle John to churches of what was then the Roman province of Asia. Now the geographical territory of Western Turkey. In these letters the Lord reflects both his knowledge of and his concern for the church. There are some Bible students who in looking at these two chapters and the seven churches have suggested that these churches form a prophetic calendar of Christian history. That each church represents a succeeding era of history in the Christian church. Under this view, the first letter the Ephesian letter represents the apostolic age which had great power but also as it closed out it began to lose its first love. Then the succeeding ages of church history rolled by until you come to the present age which is held to be the last age or the Laodicean age where the church is neither hot nor cold.

One of the problems I've always had with this view is that as I read church history and as I try to observe what is happening in churches today I see these letters not as a calendar or a prophetic time table of church history. In fact, I would suggest that if we looked around Orange County we would find all seven churches present and alive now. There are Ephesian churches. There are Smyrnan churches. There are Philadelphia churches. There are Laodicean churches. There are Sardis churches. That has been the way it has always been in the body of Christ. In fact sometimes I think all seven churches are in one church. And sometimes all at once. I have found that at various stages of my Christian experience the life of these seven churches has been in me.

So rather looking at the churches to project some kind of prophetic timetable, I would like for us to look at them as Christ sharing his concerns both for his church and for us as individual members in his body.

The first letter is the letter to the church at Ephesus. The great church, located in a great city. I have been in Ephesus. Not too many people go to Ephesus today. It's off the beaten path. It is no longer an inhabited city. Just archeological ruins there. The first place I was ever at in the biblical world was Ephesus. I kept walking around Ephesus saying, I'm standing at last on Biblical ground! The amphitheater which is still standing impacted me deeply. After two and a half years of ministry of the apostle Paul at Ephesus the gospel has come with such power into the city that it has converted so many people that the number one income producing item in the town has taken a depression – that's idol making. The trade union members, the guide members, hold a rally in the amphitheater. Acts doesn't tell us how many that amphitheater sat. But we know from being here it seats 25,000 people. They shout "Great is Diana!" And Paul is wanting to preach in the amphitheater. His friends say no, if you go there you're going to be torn limb from limb. They're after you, Paul. I can hear Paul saying, "But I've never preached to a crowd that big in my life." The disciples restrained him. They didn't let him do it.

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A great and important town of the biblical world. The church had come there with great power.

Signs and wonders and miracles and conversions. It had a great start. It had been pastored by not only Paul but also later by Timothy and then by the apostle John. When you read the letters of Paul you find such a difference between the letter of the Ephesians and the Corinthians. The Corinthian church had so many problems but the Ephesian church appears to be a church that is mature and balanced.

Every one of the letters the Lord writes to these churches you can pretty much put an outline grid on the letter. I'll use five words that all begin with "C" that help you and me to get a hold of the content of these letters.

The first C is Character. Some dimension of the character of Jesus is pointed out to that church. Those dimension of his character flow out of the revelation of him that is in the first chapter when John sees Jesus and becomes as one dead, so great is the magnificence of Christ when he sees them. There's first the Character of Christ.

The second is if Christ can find anything to Commend, he commends the church. There are only two churches, which he doesn't commend – Sardis and Laodicea. That's a good pattern of behavior. Before you correct somebody try to commend them first.

The third thing that the Lord does is he Criticizes. He points out what he wants changed. There are only two churches where he doesn't ask for any changes – Smyrna and Philadelphia.

Then the fourth is Correct. He brings the corrected change, which he wants to institute.

Then the fifth thing he does is he brings a Challenge to the church.

So using that grid of five Cs, we'll look at this letter of the Lord to the Ephesus church which is also to us.

The character of Christ.

The first thing we see when we look at Christ, and there are many things of him in Revelation 1 that are pointed out. But the thing that John sees as it relates to the Ephesian church is that Christ has in his right hand the stars. What is meant by that? At the end of Revelation 1 we're told what the stars are. They are the angels of the churches. Not physical angels with wings and all that but angels meaning messengers, most likely meaning the leadership or the pastor of the church. Some thing it means the personifying spirit of the church. What character of Christ, I believe we're being pointed to at this moment is that Christ is saying, I've got the leadership of the church and therefore the whole church firmly in my grip. The right hand is the hand of power and strength.

There are all kinds of ways to hold on to things. The word that is used here of Jesus having the grab on the stars in his right hand is that word in the Greek language which describes something that is wholly within the hand. It signifies a grip so strong it cannot be broken. To a church that is experiencing terrible persecution and threats of every kind where leaders are being hauled off to be martyred, Jesus is saying first of all to his church, I've got you secure. I have you in my

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hand. I always like the phrase a lot better that the Lord has a stronger grip on me than I have on him. I think that at times I have a fairly strong grip on Christ. But if my relationship to Jesus Christ hangs upon my own personal strength, I am in trouble. But he's got a grip on me and he's got a grip on you. That's the first thing that Jesus reminds the church – I've got you in my grip.

The second aspect of his character that we are pointed to in this letter to the Ephesians is the fact that the walks among the lamp stands. The lamp stand reflects the light that each church is bringing to Jesus in the world. What the Lord is saying to the church is, I am not the chairman of the board never seeing what's going on in my company. Jesus has a style of management we would call hands-on. He is a walker through his firm. He is on an inspection tour of the church. He's on continually a patrol in our life to see how we're doing, to give us encouragement, to see if there's anything he needs to correct. He is not an absentee Lord. He's present. That's his character.

Then there's the second aspect of the letter to the Ephesian church and to us, which is the commendation that Jesus brings. Three things are pointed out in the commendation. Three Ts. Three things that the Lord commends in a church. Toiling, Testing, and Tireless.

It was a Toiling church. "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance," verse 2. Deeds are underlaid with hard work, which is in term undergirded with endurance or perseverance or staying power. That all produces in my mind the word Toil. That's not a word used in common vernacular. It had been working for Christ. Not just kind of hanging lose and playing a comfortable Christian kind of a thing. But they had been at work in the world for Jesus Christ.

If Jesus were on a commendation tour of our life would he say, I commend you for the hard work you have done for me. I commend you for your toil.

It was a testing church. Not only toiling but testing. And the Lord commend sit for being a testing church. "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false." Verse 6, "You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans." This was basically a party of compromise and superiority in the church of Jesus Christ.

Ephesus lay at the juncture of three major trade roots of the ancient world. Along those trade routs came itinerant ministers who claim to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and who claim to collect offerings off the people of God. Paul when he left Ephesus thirty years before this letter was written says in Acts 20 to the elders, "I warn you that many will come in Jesus' name. They are false brethren. Test them." That church had loved with that and had tested false prophets. They had learned from Paul that not everybody who teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ or claims to teach that gospel is out for your good. There are some people who pretend to be Christian ministers, charismatic evangelists whatever, on TV and even Christian TV that are not out for your good. If you are going to be an effective Christian you're going to need test the doctrines that come along and the personalities that come along. And distinguish between loyalty to God's word and loyalty to some kind of effervescent, smiling, happy, promising, beguiling personality.

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This church was balanced. It had tested false teaching and false doctrine.

And it had been Tireless. "You have labored and have not grown weary." Not tired. Not saying, I'm giving up. I've worked long enough.

In the Ephesian church there was a core of people who never tired out. Who kept going and going and could be counted on year in and year out to be at their place of responsibility and faithfulness.

Some people get tired and quit because they're hurt. They're not recognized. All that happens in the body of Christ. But here are people who toiled but did not tire. And Jesus commends them.

What could possibly be wrong with this church? If I were called in as a church growth expert to analyze the Ephesians church, I would look around and say A toiling church, a tested church and a tireless church. Nothing wrong with this. Let's set it up as a model. Incredibly the Lord finds something wrong with it. Something to criticize in it. Lovingly criticize. He's the great doctor of the church and he knows its terminal diseases when they're in very unrecognizable stages. The Ephesian church has a disease that's terminal. It's in the early stages but it will kill the church and remove its lamp stand and its influence unless the church corrects it. It'll remove our influence as well unless we correct it. What is it?

"I have this against you. That you have left your first love." Here were people going through the duty of being a Christian. Somewhere along the line they no longer had a delight in being a Christian.

Whenever our service to Jesus Christ begins to fall off the base of duty "I've got to do this because it is expected of me. The Lord expects it of me. The church expect it of me." We can last for a while with a duty mentality but it won't last forever because we need to be delighted in the Lord and have all of our service to Christ quicken by a genuine love for him. When first love has gone out of the church toward the Lord then it also goes out one toward another. What we end up with in the body of Christ is bickering and dissention and jealousy and quarreling and hurt feelings. Why do they occur? Because first love is gone.

So the Lord is saying here to the church, "I have this against you. You have left first love." I wonder if one of the contributing factors of the church losing its first love was not the fact that it had fought so valiantly for doctrinal truth. They had resisted false teachers. There is such a thing as the fighting fundamentalists who so fights for truth that they become angry and hostile towards people in spirit. We are to contend for the truth but with a gentleness.

I like what someone has said about the church of Jesus Christ. "In essentials we need unity. In non-essentials we need liberty. And in all things we need charity."

American church growth Institute recently did a study of 39 Protestant denominations. They polled 8600 people in these 39 denominations and they asked them 17 questions. The questions were designed to produce what they called a love quotient of the church. That is a measurement by which they could determine how much within the church love is being practiced one toward another. They came to a very remarkable conclusion. They are a people that especially promote

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growth in churches. They came to the conclusion that churches do not grow necessarily because they have a whiz-bang pastor. They do not grow because they have wonderful building facilities. They do not grow necessarily because they have great programs that reach all ages. The single most effective thing that contributes to church growth is a high love quotient. Churches that have high love quotients were growing. Denominations that have them were growing. Those that had low love quotients were declining no matter what their doctrine was, no matter what their pastors were, no matter what their buildings were. They were declining.

Jesus knew that when he said, "By this shall all men know that you're my disciples if you have love for one another." He didn't have to do a scientific poll to discover that.

Criticism. Wants you to correct a lack of love. How do we go about correcting a lack of love? Jesus gives us three steps – the three Rs for correcting the lack of love.

Remember. Remember the height that you have fallen from. Remember how you loved the Lord when you first began to follow him with all your heart. Don't let your love for the Lord grow stale and cold. Don't let your love for the body grow stale. Remember the exuberance of first love when you have time for one another. Often in relations we get so busy we don't have time for one another.

Repent. What do we need to repent of? What we're doing wrong. There's an interesting tense in the Greek language. No English tense brings out the force of this tense. It's the *aorist* tense. It means stop action. Stop it all at once. It's over. Slam on the breaks stop. Not coast to a stop. That's the nature of this verb. Repent! Do it now and get it over with and do it all at once. That's when effective change really occurs. We kind of spiritually wake up. "This is it! The Lord has spoken to my heart today and this is going into action right now. Repent!"

I've found that the Lord allows me that opportunity more than once in my life and sometimes more than once in one week. Repent.

Then Repeat. "Do again the things you did at first." Jesus is saying that if you don't do these things your lamp stand is going to be removed. Lamp stand here does not mean salvation. We're not going to get in a debate on eternal security on this issue. Lamp stand here has nothing to do with salvation. It has to do with influence. The church is a lamp stand in the world and it's giving influence. He says if you as a church don't have love toward one another and toward me, your light and influence will be taken from you.

I try to think how many churches are vibrant for the Lord today who forty years ago were also powerhouses in the kingdom of God. Over a period of time their love for the Lord gets diminished. The church quits reproducing when there's no love, there's no reproduction. Then people start fighting among themselves. The influence of the church is lost. Jesus is saying it is a sure-fire way to have a lamp stand lit if there is love. But if love is not lit in your heart your influence is going to die. It's going to die on the personal level and it's going to die on the corporate level on the church level. That's why his great concern – remember, repent, repeat.

The last dimension of this letter of the Lord to the church is a challenge. "He who has an ear, hear." Jesus is saying you have ears, use them. Then he gives a challenge to overcome "To him who overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life, which goes in the paradise of God." All of a

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sudden we all get a chance to get back into Eden and eat of the tree that Eve didn't and wasn't interested in – the tree of life.

“To him who overcomes”. What does this mean? By our hard effort we're going to be given eternal life? No, Revelation 12:11 tells us how we overcome. We overcome by the blood of the lamb and by the word of our testimony. We overcome on the basis of what Christ has done for us and his life and death and resurrection by the blood of the lamb and we add our testimony and our witness to what Christ has done. The only thing we've ever done in reference to our salvation is when Jesus died for us and rose again from the dead we cheered! And in that sense we've overcome. What the writer of revelation is saying is Keep cheering. Keep being a witness. You'll overcome by the blood of the lamb and the word of your testimony.

The Lord has this searching word to our hearts. Will your love grow cold?

Here was a church who had works. Toiled. Perhaps your love is cold and you have not yet toiled for Christ. Christ wants to do a reformation in our life so that we might eagerly seek out an opportunity to serve him rather than set back and watch life go by. In our service to him our hearts might be aflame with his love.

Our Lord Jesus Christ we come to you today and we ask that the Holy Spirit will work upon our lives and hearts and cause us to remember. If there has been any lessening of our love for you we ask Lord Jesus in this moment that you would forgive us. We chose to repent. We ask Lord Jesus that you would renew a spirit of love for you in us and love for your people. We pray Lord Jesus that you will quicken our hearts to serve you with everything we have. And hold nothing back and do everything gladly for you. Not with grumbling and complaining. Not with our eyes upon people. But with our eyes on you. We know Lord Jesus that love covers a multitude of sins and there may be tension points in families here today, tension points in marriages beyond tension points with you. It's so easy to see the fault and the wrong that is in another. Love covers that. What we really need is love. Not to be loved but to be a loving person. It is in giving that we receive. In dying that we have life. We ask Lord Jesus that your wish for us will come to pass. That we'll remember the height from which we have fallen if that indeed applies and that we'll do our first works again. And love you with our whole heart. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.