

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA
Message 4
Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7

INTRO: We are in Revelation chapter 2. We are looking at the first church addressed of seven. We find it in Revelation 2:1-7. We have looked at the counselee in verse 1:

1 To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,

We have looked at the counselor in 1b:

'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

Then we have looked at the commendation:

*2 I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;
3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.*

And last, we were looking at the criticism in verse 4:

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

I recommended in the previous message that by the time we are done looking at these churches, you can have memorized both chapters. I also recommended you consider the meaning of the Church of Ephesus having left their first love, and it is there in verse 4, that we now pick up.

4. The criticism (2:4) cont'd

So, here is the last of what I gave you, I said: Barclay gives two suggestions as to what leaving their first love could mean. First, he says it could mean that they have left the love which we call the love of the honeymoon stage. Or, it could mean, and I quote: "But much more likely what this means is that the first fine rapture of Christian fellowship and love for the brotherhood is gone. In the first days the members of the Church at

Ephesus really loved each other; they had been a band of brothers; dissension had never reared its ugly head; the heart was ready to kindle and the hand ready to help. But something had gone wrong. It may well be that heresy-hunting had killed love; it may well be that the eagerness to root out all mistaken men had ended in a sour and rigid orthodoxy.

When I first read that, that seemed the most likely explanation to me. It is a pleasure for me to think through many of these things that I have had some familiarity with now for many years. But as I have pondered the previous explanations, they did not yet satisfy and began to think the explanation lies elsewhere. But it may also be that the Lord did not tell us what it was because it could happen in many ways, and if He gave one, we might think that is the only danger.

But, if this refers to the first bright love anyone has for the Lord when they first get saved out of deep sin such as the Ephesians were in, can anyone maintain that throughout their lives? No married couple can experience the first love they had for their partner for life throughout life. It changes and either grows or diminishes.

I think the answer may lie in another direction. There is a failure which I and some of you older ones will have observed already as well. It is a danger that seems almost unavoidable. It is a danger to every new Christian, to every new church, and to every new evangelical work. It is best explained in the title of a book I have mentioned in a previous message. It is a book called, "The Historical Drift." It is the drift from a first pure love for the Lord, to a general dulling of this bright love. It is a desire to live for the Lord and to obey Him above all else, which, with time wants to begin to fade. It is the dulling of the love that wants to happen to older Christians, or to second and third generation Christians. If that is so, it would be appropriate

that this would be mentioned in the very first Church, because it is a danger to every church.

Charles Ryrie comments like this on the Lord's criticism to Ephesus, that they had left their first love: "'Left' implies an intentional, not accidental, act. More than 30 years before, this church had been commended for its love (Eph. 1:15-16)", end quote. You see, what we have in Ephesus at this time is second or maybe for some, third generation Christianity.

Now let me ask you a question: When a person has lived in deep sin, and then gets saved, and now all of a sudden all of life changes and is new and exciting, and all he wants to do is please the Lord, what happens 5 years later? Or 10 years later? Or thirty years later? Five years go by and real life has set in, and now he has several children and maybe life has hit some hard times; and here is the question: How can his children continue the life of a vibrant Christian. Maybe his children never lived in the sins he did, because as a godly parent he saw to it that they had a better up-bringing.

But let us say his children live quite good Christian lives, but now they have children. How can they keep spiritual vibrancy going? If you can answer that, I would like to hear the answer. The book called the historical drift says that if a church or organization recognizes this danger, they can maintain a godly church a lot longer. Oh how challenging to keep that first zealous love going in succeeding generations!

I remember being in Bible school and watching second and third generation Christians. I was on fire and expected light and life from them, but they were interested in entirely different things than I was. They wanted to do dramas. They could not see a problem with many things that I wondered greatly at. They did not think social drinking was that bad. They had never seen their parents get drunk. And I wondered, how could they call

themselves Christians, and not see further than that? There seemed to be something missing in them, and there seemed to be no way for them to know what they were missing. They wanted to experiment with all kinds of music and other things. And it baffled me.

John F. Walvoord may be right when he says, "Thus it has ever been in the history of church: first a cooling of spiritual love, then the love of God replaced by a love for the things of this world, with resulting compromise and spiritual corruption" (56).

So let me say this: The true test of one's Christianity does not usually come when one is first saved. It comes afterward, when one has become familiar with much of Christianity. After being a Christian for 10 years, this danger is higher than ever. After one has been a Christian for 20 years, this danger is still higher, and it does not get less from there on. And for the children of such a Christian, the danger of leaving God is still higher. Slowly and dangerously, a cooling off wants begin somewhere through something. For every church that lives any amount of years, that cooling off is almost inevitable.

Jesus said in Matthew 24:12, "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold." Nothing will cool love for the Lord down faster than sin or lawlessness. Soon you can hardly tell the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. It is my view that this cooling off wants to begin with such simple things as clothing or language or joking. I remember the time when the Church laid down the relentless battle against worldly clothing. Today, haircuts, and jewelry and tattoos and clothing styles are dictated by the world, and our battle against those things is mostly over. We have succumbed and do not realize how worldly we are. And then this attitude infiltrates other areas. And today, in most churches, divorce is acceptable; and in many

churches now even deeper sins than that are acceptable. And love is waxing cold.

And after 30 years of Christianity in Ephesus, the Lord Jesus said, "I have this against you that you have left your first love." And here is the great question: How can you keep spiritual vibrancy going more than 20 or 30 years? Well, we come then to the counsel in 2:5-7a. Here is the cure for the historical drift.

5. The counsel (2:5-7a)

We come now to the Lord's counsel in verse 5. It says:

5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent.

Now you see, we have three clear points here. First, remember; second repent; and third, redo. We begin with the command to remember.

Remember therefore from where you have fallen. It is important that we consider the original word translated to remember. It is the word *mneeme*. As I see the use of the word 'heart' in Scripture, it speaks of the whole area we call the mind. And it has a number of parts and memory is part of that. The mind has a data processor, called the *phreen* in the NT, and a place for data storage called the *nous*. The memory is that part that can go into the storage part and recall to the data processor the information that has previously been stored.

You see, a tomb, in the original NT is called a *mneema*. Why? It brings to memory the person that is buried there. Go to Luke 16:25. It is the account of the rich man and Lazarus, and Abraham is talking to the rich man who is in hell, and Luke writes, ""But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now

he is comforted and you are tormented." Note the word remember. It is *mnaomai*, from the same root as our word. You see, the rich man had in his storage bank information of his past life, and Abraham is recalling it to his mind here. Let me remind you here that in hell people do not forget the past. Someone has said that may be a large part of the torment.

Go to Matthew 26:23. The word *mneemosunon*, from the same root word, speaks of a memorial. Just before Jesus was crucified, as He was having a meal in a certain place, a woman came and poured out very expensive perfume on Him. And the disciples, and especially Judas were quite upset about that and said, "This could have been sold for a lot of money and given to the poor." So look at verse 3. Jesus said:

"Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."

All these words we have looked at have the same root word. And in our passage Jesus said to the Ephesian church, "Remember..." He wanted them to pull something out of the storage part of their mind and place it in the thinker part and to think about it. So He says, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen..."

Now look at what they were to remember. They were to remember from where they had fallen. So if they fell, are they to blame? Maybe the devil inadvertently tripped them up. Do you remember what it said first? It said they had left their first love. They forsook their first love. It was no accident. They let it happen. Do you remember what the word 'Ephesus' means? Let go, declension, change.

I recommend that maintaining this first love is like having to stay up by hanging on to something. As soon as you let go, Ephesus, you fall. It is a constant challenge to stay up. As soon as you let

go, or relent, you begin to fall. It is always a constant effort to stay up. And after a few generations they got tired and began to let go. So it is with parents in the home. And then they begin to excuse what they let go. Maybe, for the Ephesians, there were a lot of little things they let go, like the little pieces of silt in the river that caused them to decline.

And by remembering from where they had fallen, they had to go back with regard to their first love. So think with me. There were some Christians here who were saved 30 years earlier. There were some who were teenagers when their parents were saved. And now some of them had children and they had not personally experienced all the sins of their parents. You see, the change from an unsaved Ephesian to a saved one is huge! The sins they had lived in were huge! But over these thirty years something had happened. They had left their first love. The humdrum of Christianity had set in. And the Lord is calling them to remember, to go back in their minds, and think of what it was like back then.

And may I remind you that we have hardly any first generation Christians here. We have second and third generation Christians. How do you maintain a first love? As much as I don't like some of what we have experienced as a church, it may do more than anything else to keep us from letting this happen.

We go on. The Lord said, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent..." We find the area in these believers that had been infected and had caused them to leave their first love. And the solution is found in the word, repent. It is the word *metanoia*. It means to change the mind, to change what has been stored in the nous. I mentioned earlier the storage part of the mind. It is the *nous*. Something had crept into their minds and they had accepted that and lived by it. That is what happens with things we let into our minds.

It may be some teaching, or some worldliness, or some mindset about finances or any of a myriad of things. And it had infected their minds. And if they would remember from where they had fallen, they would find what this is. Why does the Lord not mention what it was? Could it be because if He had we would think that is the only thing that is a concern, and if we don't have that thing we are OK, when in fact a host of other things could do the same thing?

And when we think back, and remember, and find where the problem is; there is one thing to do: repent! To repent means to change the mind. That is what *metanoia* means. We have to get rid of some way of thinking, and go back to where we were when we left the path.

I would encourage us all to do this. Go home and think about what it is like for you. Are you going forward? Are you pressing on? Are you growing closer to the Lord spiritually? Are you overcoming sin? Then rejoice and commit yourself to keep going forward, because there is a price with going forward. But if you are now allowing things you know you should not, or if you once dropped something, and now have picked it up again; there is one word: Repent!

My wife read this quote for me from John McArthur the other day. He said, "There are many people today, running around calling for the nation to repent who need to be calling for the Church to repent. Unless churches repent and turn from sin and pursue holiness, there is no hope for the nation", (Quote on Pintrest, John McArthur).

And let me add to that that the church is made up of individual believers. So we could say that unless individual Christians repent, there is no hope for the nation.

We come to our third point then. First, remember; second repent, and third; redo, do the first works. Here we get a clue as to what their first

love had to do with. It did not have to do with warm feelings towards the Lord. It had to do with what their first works were. Their faith in the Lord had caused them to do some things that they had stopped doing, and he now calls them to redo.

We do not know what that was, and no doubt the Lord has a reason for not telling us. We did learn some things they did when they were first saved. Acts 19:19-20 says:

19 Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver.

20 So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

Here we see the kind of zeal they had in obeying the Lord. The Lord Jesus did say, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Were they failing to continue to obey Him? Was their prayer life dying? Whatever it was, the Lord calls them to do what they had done when they were first saved. I mentioned earlier that the book, "The Historical Drift" said that if a church recognized what was happening when they drifted, they could avoid falling for many more years.

The counsel is first and foremost to remember from where they have fallen. Second, to repent. They need to change their mind. Repentance precedes works. But after repentance a change of life begins.

The Lord then gives a very serious warning. He says:

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent.

The Lord says if they do not repent, He will personally see to it quickly that their lampstand is removed from its place. Now here is a question I wrestled with: What does the removal of the lampstand mean? Does it mean the church is closed down? Or does it mean that it ceases to be a church through which God will shine His light?

Interestingly, this church either repented and therefore continued to exist for some 350-400 years, or it continued to exist as a place people gathered but it was no longer a light in Ephesus. What raises this question as to whether it means the church is shut down or it continues but it no longer continues as a light through which the Lord shines? Well, for example, the Roman Catholic church. For almost 2,000 years it ceased to exist as a light in the world for truth, but it is still called a church and is larger than the Evangelical church. The United Church has ceased to exist as a light in the world, but it still has many places open for worship. That is what raises the question. Today many evangelical churches have become emergent and they exist, but does the Holy Spirit still light it up through the people?

John Gill says regarding the removal of the candlestick, "...for this cannot be understood of the total removing of the church state itself quickly, no, not of Ephesus itself; for though there is not now indeed, nor has there been for many hundred years, a church of Christ in that place, yet there was one till the times of Constantine, when there was none in any of the other seven cities, and a long time after..."; which shows, that this was not a commination or threatening of divine vengeance to that church literally, but to the state of the church, which that represented; nor does it intend the utter abolition of that church, for the apostolic church still continued, though it ceased to be in the circumstances it was before."

The Family Commentary says of the removal of the candlestick: "...extinguish the light of thy church — an awful warning which Christ fulfilled

long ago to the church in Ephesus, that has been for centuries extinct, and which he has fulfilled to many unfaithful churches since."

I tend to think that it means the light of the church is extinguished, though it continues to function. When a church forsakes the Lord, its light grows dimmer and dimmer until the light is extinguished, though it continues in name as a place of gathering. Oh, to have the Holy Spirit leave a church is a sad thing. But where sin grows the light dims.

But the Lord now adds another commendation, after admonishing them for leaving their first love. The Lord says in 2:6:

6 "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

In spite of having left their first love, the Ephesians hated something the Lord also hated. Notice first that they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. They detested what they did. And then we note second that the Lord also hated these deeds.

Now I want you to notice something that has become a cliché in our day. Here it is, God hates the sin, but loves the sinner. My wife gave me a quote a while ago by D.A. Carson. He "is a Canadian born, Reformed Evangelical theologian and professor of the New Testament", according to an internet article. He says, and I quote:

"Does God love the sinner but hate the sin? One Evangelical cliché has it that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. There is a small element of truth in these words; God has nothing but hate for the sin, but this cannot be said with respect to how God sees the sinner. Nevertheless, the cliché is false on the face of it, and should be abandoned. Fourteen times in the first 50 Psalms alone the Psalmist states that God hates the sinner, that his wrath is on the liar, and so

forth. In the Bible the wrath of God rests on both the sin Romans 1:18-23 and the sinner (1:24-32; 2:5, John 3:36)" D.A. Carson.

Now you know these verses from Psalm 139:23-24. Listen to them:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties;

24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.

I ask, does that sound like a righteous man to you? But listen to the four verses he wrote right before these:

19 Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men.

20 For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain.

21 Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

May I ask you, in today's teaching of unconditional love, does that sound like the Bible to you? It doesn't. But it is part of it. So we must bring our understanding in line with the word of God, not with modern theology and cliché's.

Now, the commendation of this church in Ephesus is that they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans and the Lord hated those deeds as well. In this thing the church was of the same mind as the Lord. What is meant by the Nicolaitans? Walvoord presents two views: First is the view that these are the people conquerors. This view comes from the word Nicolaitans which comes from *nikao* = to conquer + *laos* = people; thus to conquer the people. J.B. Smith says, "They were leaders in the church who

posed as lords over God's heritage. Doubtless here are the beginnings of priestcraft, a system that later developed into the Roman hierarchy" (64).

The second view is that this was a sect started by Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch and one of the seven deacons. A helpful internet site is "Gotquestions.org." Here is what they write: 'The exact origin of the Nicolaitans is unclear. Some Bible commentators believe they were a heretical sect who followed the teachings of Nicolas—whose name means "one who conquers the people"—who was possibly one of the deacons of the early church mentioned in Acts 6:5. It is possible that Nicolas became an apostate, denying the true faith and became part of a group holding 'the doctrine of Balaam,' who taught Israel 'to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.' Clement of Alexandria says, 'They abandoned themselves to pleasure like goats, leading a life of self-indulgence.' Their teaching perverted grace and replaced liberty with license."

Of these two views, I personally think the deeds of the Nicolaitans is a reference to licentious living. First, it is quite early in Church history to have a problem with clerical hierarchy. And second, there were other teachings like that of the Gnostics who abused the doctrine of grace and introduced licentiousness in its place (2 Peter 2:15, 19; Jude 1:4).

It seems to me, because of the constant pull of man's sin nature, that man is ever seeking ground to live according to the dictates of the flesh, or to not deal with those who do, while at the same time maintaining an outward Christian appearance. Jude writes in verses 3-4:

3 Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

4 For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I cannot help but wonder what our Lord would say about the teachings of unconditional love, unconditional grace, unconditional eternal security, and unconditional forgiveness? I cannot see otherwise than that the subtle outcome of these teachings is to turn the grace of God into freedom to allow sin to go undisciplined.

When Christians live wrong in business; when they do wrong to their boss at work; when Christians live in deep worldliness, when Christians may divorce and remarry and be church members, when Christians smoke and drink alcohol, would not the Lord say, "I hate the deeds of those people?" Would He say to a church which does not allow such things in their church, "You hate that which I hate?"

Well, we come to the final counsel given is that whoever has an ear is to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches (pl.). Now, you see, the Ephesians were not only to give heed to that which the Lord said to them, but they were to give heed to what the Lord said to the other churches as well!

The Lord gives a final counsel here that He will give to every church. We find it like this in verse 7:

7 He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Notice now how personal the Lord has become. He is speaking to each individual believer in the church who has an ear to hear. This verse, I believe, is addressed now not only to the pastor, but to every individual Christian who has an ear to hear. Now

the imperative to hear, is simply a command to obey.

It is only in the last year or so that the words of verse 7 have really come through to me. When a church drifts off course, you will find very few people who have an ear to hear. The meaning of having an ear to hear, is not really an ear problem. It is a heart problem. When the heart is soft and seeks for godliness, and hungers for truth and righteousness, a hearing ear is the outcome. When something is preached that touches some raw area in their lives, they are not offended, but corrected.

The ear is the vehicle of the voice of God to the heart. And a hungry and soft heart will welcome reproof and correction. A heart that is hard will send messengers to please plug up that hole that is letting those sound waves in. Oh to have a hearing ear. Only humility can handle and hear correction and do it. And humility can accept it from anyone. I believe it is through the preaching of the Word that we become soft. We must be conditioned to hear.

6. The Comfort (2:7b)

We come now to our last verse to this church and it is a verse of comfort. Revelation 2:7 says:

2:7 To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.

Now I want you to notice something very carefully first. It does not say, "To him who becomes a Christian..." It says to the one who overcomes. There is a huge difference between becoming a Christian and becoming an over-comer.

So we ask, just what is an over-comer? The word, to overcome is nikao. We get our word 'Nikee' from it. If you look at the name, 'Nicolaitans'. If you will recall the word 'nicolaitans' comes from

nikao = to conquer + laos = people; thus to conquer the people. But the word 'over-comer' is only the first part of this word. And it means to conquer or to get the victory over.

Now it may be that the Satan was able to get the victory over those the Nicolaitans were able to persuade by turning the grace of God into licentiousness. But over what did the overcome get the victory? They got the victory over the world, the flesh and the devil. They overcame. You see, how could a Christian divorce and remarry and still gain the victory? Is it possible? How can a Christian be crooked in business and gain the victory? How can a person hooked on porn gain the victory? Only by overcoming those sins can one be an overcomer. All those who have battled these sins and won, know what it is to overcome.

Now look at the promise to the overcomer. He will be given to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God. This paradise is the Garden of Eden as restored in Revelation 21-22. This is a promise to the overcomer which will be experienced by every overcomer of every church in the church age! The word to overcome is the Greek word nikao which means victory.

Now look at the promise to the overcomer. He will give him to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God. This is the promise to the overcomer. Let me read from a message I did some years ago:

So, I want to now first define for you what I mean by Paradise. We get our English word 'paradise' from the Greek word, 'paradeisos'. The Greeks got this word from the Persians who called it 'pairidaeza' This word, according to the original Webster's dictionary, means, "a pleasure garden with parks and other appendages." Paradise came to be the word used for the Garden of Eden.

Some years ago I did a complete message on the Garden of Eden. How many here remember that? Let me

quote from that message, "Now before the time of Christ the Greek language became a universal language something like English today. Seventy Jewish scholars were assigned to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This translation, used by both Jesus and the apostles, is called the Septuagint. I checked the Septuagint in Genesis 2-3 to see how they had translated the word garden. Of the thirteen occurrences the Septuagint has translated it *paradeisos* all thirteen times. In other words in the Greek language it is the paradise of Eden."

Now in Hebrew, Eden means delight. So the Greek of the OT reads, '*paradeisos tees trupheis*', or 'the paradise of delights.' I recommend to you that this describes the experience of the believer after death. If you wish to have the evidence I give for this, you have to come for the rest of the messages.

And just where is that? Look at Revelation 21:1-2:

1 Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.

2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

That is the paradise of God. Look at chapter 22:

1 And he showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb,

2 in the midst of the street thereof. And on this side of the river and on that was the tree of life, bearing twelve manner of fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

This is a most wonderful promise. How would you, like Esau, want to sell that for a pot of soup? Would you sell it for porn, or adultery or any other

sin? Yet multiplied thousands do. Oh, if we live right, in the midst of severe temptations, it will be worth it all, when we see Jesus.

CONCL: