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The Cold Church

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Series: What's Wrong With the Church?  
Revelation 2:1-7

**BIG IDEA – WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE CHURCH?**

Two Cities Church, why do we take the time to show you videos like that? It's because our fear is, honestly, that is maybe where some of you are. Did you hear what Jacob said? He said, "I was religiously alive, but I was spiritually dead." We talk about being in church but not being in Christ, being baptized but maybe never really believing. We call it being *religiously lost*.

Here's what I want you to hear me say at the beginning of 2024: Do not settle for simply showing up at church. Do not settle for attendance. Desire personal transformation by the gospel. We're trying to come alongside you, if you haven't realized this, as a church. Two weeks in a row we gave you a gift. It's a little booklet, but grab it. We have the prayer guide. I want to show you this.

I want to show you the connection. We do everything we do on purpose. We are an intentional and deliberate church. Last week we gave you a plan; this week we gave you prayer. We believe in planning and praying. I want you to know this about our church. We are a both/and church. We reject being an either/or church. We are going to be focused and flexible. We are going to have strategy, and we are going to be Spirit-led.

I told you last week a plan means we're serious. I hope you know that. That's how you know someone is serious. How do you get serious about losing weight? You have a plan. How do you get serious about discipling your family? You have a plan. So, that was last week. I'm not going to revisit that. This week we want to talk about prayer. Prayer is the place of dependence. Prayer is the place of power. Prayer is the place of intimacy.

Why are we praying? Why are we starting with the 21 days of prayer? Listen. I don't have a Bible verse for you that you have to do 21 days. Why did we choose 21 days? Because it's short enough that you'll do it and long enough that it'll make a difference. If we said, "Guys, we're launching a year in prayer," you guys would be like, "I give up already." So we're doing 21 days.

Here's the other thing. We need to do this together. By the way, if you're not in a Community Group, you need to go through our Weekender, and then you need to come to a Group Connect. I think we're going to be launching 16 new groups this month. You will not get all you can out of this church, this sermon series, or this prayer guide if you're not in a group.

Guys, we're going to do 21 days, and what we want to help you do is we want to help you know what to say and where to start when it comes to prayer. Those are the two reasons people say they don't pray more than they would. "I don't know what to say, and I don't know where to start." We're going to help you in this guide. So, I hope you'll take it, you'll take it seriously, you'll do it with your family, and you'll do it with your Community Group.

So, the first thing is we're starting the year with a plan and with prayer, but also, we want to celebrate. If you were with us over the last month or two, you know we've been doing a Hold the Rope offering. Basically, we said, "Would all of you..." It's always hard to measure if all of you did this. We didn't have a financial goal; we had a participation goal. We said, "Would you give a one-time gift above and beyond normal tithes and offerings to Hold the Rope?"

Now, here's what I want you to know. We have a \$6 million budget as a church. When it comes to the church world, which is what I understand a little bit about... If a church gives 10 percent of their annual budget for an offering at the end of the year, you're killing it. Well, because of your generosity, we brought in \$952,635.38.

I know what you're thinking. "Who gave 38 cents?" Listen. We care about every gift no matter how small here. Okay? Here's what we're going to do. There are a lot of purposes for money. I've talked on that in the past. One of the kingdom purposes for money, for finances, is to fuel and fund the mission and help it go forward faster.

So, guys, thank you so much. We've already been able to make a few phone calls. We're excited this coming week to call our ministry and mission partners to encourage them at the beginning of the year and to give them some gifts to help them go farther faster. Let's pray, and then we are officially diving into our *What's Wrong With the Church?* series.

Lord, I just pray that our church would be a place of prayer. Would you make this room a place of prayer? As we leave and as we take these books with us, as we head into our Community Groups, as we head to our family dinners, as we head to bedtime and breakfast and all of the things we do, would you help us to do what we're really trying to do here, which is to make and mobilize disciples in an environment of prayer and worship. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right. You know the name of this series. Here's what it's called: *What's Wrong With the Church?* The answer to that is "Well, how much time do you have?" There's not a sentence. There's not a statement. There's not even one sermon I can preach. What I'm going to do over the next seven weeks...

So please come back. By the way, you can't get to know us and we can't get to know you in a week. You're going to need to come around for the rest of this series to really see if we are the church for you. We say here, "We're the church for anybody, but not the church for everybody."

Anyway, we need to ask the question...*What's wrong with the church?* The answer has been "A lot of things," and it's always changing. This is why, over the centuries, Christians have said the church must go through constant renewal and constant reformation. But it's interesting. I read a lot about this this week.

If you look at what Christians say is wrong with the church, that's different than what non-Christians say. We would expect that. Here's what Christians say is wrong with the church. Like, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving, real followers of Jesus. Here's what they say. "Here's what's wrong with the church." They give two things.

First, "The church is trying to be cool." Here's the good news for you guys. I realized a long time ago I'm not cool. You're not even laughing. You're like, "You are not cool. You are not cool at all." I know. We know. I'm glad you know. Yeah, I'm not cool. We're not cool. Here's what we're trying to do as a church. We're not trying to make the Bible relevant. Like, "Oh, look at your iPhone. Let me try to..." No. We're not trying to make the Bible relevant. We're trying to show the relevancy of the Bible to people.

The second thing Christians say... Their biggest complaint is "You've actually left the teaching of the Bible." Here's what happened in COVID. It happened before COVID in some ways but really was exacerbated, amplified, and magnified by COVID. When times get darker, people want to go deeper, obviously. So sermonettes and topical

*this* and another sermon on habits in your family and your finances is not enough. It takes the whole Bible to make the whole Christian.

Okay. That's what Christians say. What does the world say? Well, a lot. Actually, what's interesting is not much changes over time, so we'll get to all of these in the weeks to come, but let me give you a couple. Some say, "The church is just full of hypocrites." To that we have to say, "Listen." You have to understand this about yourself.

You're going to be a hypocrite at some level, so the best thing to do is to be a humble hypocrite, be aware of all of your inadequacies, and actually say to people, "I'd like to look like Jesus. That would be really cool if I could look like Jesus, but on my way to looking like Jesus I'm going to look like somebody who needs Jesus." That's what the Christian life looks like. Often, I look more like I need Jesus than I look like Jesus. I wish that wasn't true.

The second thing people say is, "The church has become so political." Here we are. It's 2024. You're going to keep hearing me talk about it. Here it is. It's an election year. The problem is nothing is pre-political anymore, unfortunately. Everything has been politicized.

The third thing people say is, "There are a lot of intellectual problems I have with Christianity. I was confronted with them in school. There are different ideas, and there are competing ideologies. I feel like the church is kind of stuck in the past." We'll talk about that some.

The failure of leaders, scandals, spiritual abuse, all of the things that make the headlines. The honest truth is most pastors, most church leaders, and most Christians are good, humble, faithful people, but unfortunately that doesn't make the headlines.

The final thing... And we'll get into this. This shows up in a couple of different churches. What's wrong with the church? The number-one answer, way bigger than anything else (you know what I'm going to say before I say it), is the Christian, biblical sexual ethic. What's wrong with the church? Well, the world has something to say. The Christians have something to say. With the rest of our time I want us to look at what Jesus says. We're going to look at the seven churches in seven weeks.

## **00 BACKGROUND: THE 7 CHURCHES**

The first church is the church at Ephesus. Let's turn to chapter 2, verse 1. I just want to read this. ***"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'"*** I want to talk about really quickly... We're kind of introducing the whole series today as well as diving into Ephesus.

There are seven churches. Why are the seven churches mentioned in the order that they are? Is this like the best church to the worst church or the worst church to the best church? No. These are churches in what would be modern-day Turkey, and they are mentioned in the order of their postal route. This is just how the letters would be delivered. That's all that is.

What I want you to understand is here we are 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and we already have seven churches in seven different areas. The Bible teaches the church is both universal and local. This is just basic theology but good for you to know if you don't know this already.

What do I mean when I say the church is universal? The *universal church* is the invisible church. We can't see it. It's everybody, everywhere, across all time, who has ever believed. It's like, "Okay. That's a lot of people." C.S. Lewis is in the universal church. The universal church is the invisible church of God. The *local church* is when the universal church becomes visible in time and space and in a location.

What we see here is he writes to seven different churches. Now, all of the churches have different problems. Sometimes what he's going to do to a church is commend it. For some churches (we'll see this next week) he only has things to commend. Most churches he commends and confronts, or *convicts*, if you want a softer word. This is normally what he does. He commends, then he convicts, and then he calls them to something greater.

I want you to hear this, and maybe those of you who are interested in this will understand a little bit more what I'm trying to do up here. What am I trying to do up here each week? Well, listen. Jesus gives a different word to every church. Every church needs a different word from God's Word. Here's what I mean by this. It's what theologians call the *rhema*. What Jesus is giving each church is the *rhema*.

*Rhema* is a Greek word meaning utterance. Here's what it is: God's word for *this* church at *this* moment. If you guys ever want to know how to pray for me and the other people up here who teach, that's exactly what you want to pray for. We want God's word (that's what we start with) for *this* church at *this* exact moment. I know when I'm doing that, because when I'm doing that it's very, very quiet in here. Everybody is learning something important together for the moment.

I want you to notice one other thing about this. The early churches targeted cities. We think it takes all types of churches to reach all types of people in all different types of places, but I want you to know, because many of you are new, that we called ourselves *Two Cities Church* for a reason, and we've been in downtown Winston-Salem the entire time we've existed.

We always came to Winston-Salem not so much with a church vision but with a city vision, because (you know this) everything flows from the cities. So, here's what I want us to see with our time left. I want us to see what Jesus is going to say the Ephesian church does well (that would be his commendation), I want you to see his confrontation, and then his call.

## **01 COMMEND: DEVOTION & DEEDS**

First, we'll look at what they do well. Look with me at verses 2 and 3. *"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary."*

Let me summarize where we're headed with the rest of our time. The church at Ephesus had a good head and good hands and a bad heart. I'm going to show you all this. In verses 2 and 3 it's all commendation, and he tells them four things they're doing well. These are things we would hope you and your family and your Community Group and our church could do as well. Let me give you the four things. You can see them in the verses. They arise right out of Scripture.

The first thing they were was a *servicing* church. Jesus always starts by saying, "I know your works." Then the first thing he says is "Your toil." What does *toil* mean? It means to work to the point or place of exhaustion. It is a good thing to go to bed at night, to crawl into bed after a long day, and to be exhausted because you've been working for the Lord.

I want to talk about what it looks like... I think we're growing in these. By the way, as I give you these, these are, in some ways, actual in our church. We're doing them. I think they also are aspirational. We're pursuing them even more. The heart of a serving church is a couple of things.

First, we serve God by serving people made in his image. I want you to know that. Serving God is not some esoteric, religious, spiritual experience. I don't even know

what that means, but you know what I'm saying. Serving God is very, very practical. I serve God by serving people in his image. I serve the God I can't see by serving people I can see.

This is another thing we have to keep clarifying just because religion creeps into the church so easily. We don't work *for* our salvation; we work *from* our salvation. Let me say it a different way. Christians are not saved by their works; they're saved by Jesus' works. We serve God because he first served us.

Now, this is really important to understand. For us to be a serving church... Again, I think at one level we're actually there and at another level we're aspirationally trying to head there. We have to view ourselves here as an army, not an audience. Now here's the truth. This is why this is a word for right now for us. When you get a brand-new, big building, it's easy to view yourself as an audience, not an army.

I mean, look around. This is an amazing room. The bigger the church, the better the worship team, the more ministries and programs they have, the more dynamic the kids' ministry, the more fun the youth group, the more consumeristic we can become as a church. See, an audience shows up to be entertained. An army shows up to be equipped. Those are very different.

Why do you go to Steven Tanger Center? To be entertained and to watch the professionals do the work. That's the audience mentality. I've already described it as a football game. I've heard it said before many churches are like football games. There are 11 people on the field desperately in need of rest, and there are 50,000 people in the stands desperately in need of exercise.

We want to have here an army mentality, not an audience mentality. Not a celebrity culture but a servant culture. The second thing it means if we're going to be a serving church is we have to be all in, not just attend. One of our main values here is stewardship. You'll hear that. You'll see that. Basically, it just means we're going to be all in with our time, talent, and treasure.

If you don't know this, the way our church started... People ask all the time, "How did this start and how did it grow so fast?" I don't know all of the answers to that, but one of the answers I know is we had 100 people who were on what was called our *launch team*. They were the first members of our church.

They all said, "We're all in with our time, talent, and treasure. We're going to tithe, and we understand *tithe* means 10 percent of our income. We're going to give 10 percent of our income to the kingdom of God through the local church." Wow. "And we're

going to use our gifts, and we're going to serve in our capacities. We're just all in with our time, talent, and treasure."

The temptation, instead of being all in, is simply to attend. I read something on Twitter this week. A pastor said on Sunday, "Let me ask you this question: Are you going to go to church with your family or are you going to squeeze it in?" Let me just encourage you, by the way. We have 9:00 service time here. I was just thinking about this today.

There's so much grace here. Hear me say this. Let's try to be to the 9:00 service on time. You need every worship song we are leading you in. You need to get here. You might need to get here a little early and prepare your heart and go, "This is a unique moment. We only do this once a week, and I want to be all in."

The first thing is they were a serving church. The second thing is they were a *separated* church. Let's look back at this. Verse 2: "***I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil...***" It's not talking about the world, although we can talk about the world. It's talking about those in the church who claim Christ but do not live like him. We all sin. It's not talking about that. It's talking about those who live in open, unrepentant sin.

The role of the church is to be distinct and different from the world. One of the main things we'd like to be is an attractive alternative. Wouldn't that be great? It's like, "All right. The world is anxious and angry and addicted and aimless." The world is all that, and we want to be an attractive alternative. The only way you can make a difference is if you're different.

So, how do we live different and distinct lives from the world? Well, here's what we need to do. We need to protect one another. Here's what the church is. Let me explain it this way: the church's posture toward itself is protection; the church's posture toward the world is prophetic. I'll get to *prophetic* in a second.

The old covenants in these churches... Back in the day, to be a part of the church you'd sign a covenant. The covenant would say something like, "We promise to watch over one another in love." That's what this early church did. Let me say it more simply. Here's what we should do.

If you see sin in a brother or sister's life who you know and have a relationship with, you should say something. This is how you protect the purity and peace of the church. Here's a good rule: wait until you see it three times. The first time you might be like, "Was that really it?" The second time you're like, "Am I just trying...?"



It'll be very, very hard, by the way, if you bring something to someone and you give them three examples... It'll be very, very hard for them to deny it if they did it three different times. Here's the way we are going to continue to be a separated, different, and distinct church. This is really practical, and this could start in your... You know, your marriage would be good and with your kids would be great. A commitment to have courageous conversations.

Let me give you the theology under a courageous conversation, because I know some of you are so scared. You've played it out, and you know what he's going to say and she's going to say. They have their internal lawyer, so they're going to get defensive. It's all scary. Whenever you confront somebody, you have to deal with their excuses, and then you have to deal with their anger, and then you have to deal with their tears. That's normally the order. It's very hard on people.

So, here's the theology under it: "I care more about what God thinks than what she thinks." That is bottomless. If you can think that, that will put steel in your spine. By the way, you don't want to be looking forward to confronting them. If you're looking forward to confronting this person, stop. You're not ready yet. "I can't wait to tell her!" You're not ready to tell her. That's what we know.

I love the question, "Help me understand." Isn't that awesome? I didn't come up with that. "Help me understand." Why do I love it? It's humble and it's hopeful. Do you get both of those? You have to mean it. It can't be a manipulative thing you say but don't really mean. "Please help me understand."

I love it because it's humble. "I may be missing something completely." And it's really, really hopeful. "I would like to understand. I believe you have a reason for this. Maybe there's something you know that I don't know." By the way, you could honestly just look at how Jesus deals with each church as a way to have courageous conversations.

That's a whole other sermon, but really quickly, he always commends what he can commend, then he gives them specific feedback where they need to change, then he paints a picture of what their life could look like if it changed, and then he commends them again. I call it the *commendation sandwich*. You commend, you confront, and you commend again.

Okay. They were a serving church because they were an army, not an audience. They were a separated church because they were willing to have hard conversations. Thirdly, they were a *serious* church. Verse 2: ***"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false."***

You're testing people. You're looking at teaching and doctrine. You are a serious church that cares about truth. One of the things we say here is "We take God's Word seriously, but we don't take ourselves seriously." By the way, if you live in the tension of all that God said, it kind of makes you confusing. People can't figure you out as a culture.

To say we're serious today, like, "We're serious..." Nobody is serious today. Are you kidding me? Have you seen how people dress? We live in the most casual, informal culture that has ever existed in America. We live in what's called a *first-name culture*. People don't even tell you their last name. "Don't call me Mister. Mr. Mercer was my dad's name." That's what we say.

We don't like authority. Everyone's favorite words are *kinda*, *sorta*, and *maybe*. People like to say, "I feel," not "I think." People don't like to draw lines. This church cared a lot about doctrine. Why? Well, first of all, they had great Bible teaching. The church was planted by Paul, pastored by Timothy, and taught often by Apollos. Apollos was the John Piper of the day. He was considered the greatest preacher around, and he would come visit.

So, this church had deep theology. Here's what I want you to understand about theology. Theology is so important. I mean, at the heart of any church is its theology, and at the heart of any theology is the gospel message of Jesus Christ. You can think about theology... If the church was a human, theology is like the skeleton. There is no human apart from the skeleton.

You build everything off the skeleton structure. Fair enough. You build your philosophy of ministry and your missional endeavors and your programs. All of that flows off of that. By the way, it says they tested. This means a couple of things. First of all, good theology always has affirmations and denials. Let me say it this way: a mature Christian knows what they believe and what they don't believe.

Here's an example. "We believe that God made everything out of nothing." That would be an affirmation. Here's a denial: "We do not believe in Darwinian, atheistic evolution that nobody times nothing equals everything." You need both. You'll only be strong if you understand both what you believe and what you don't believe, your affirmations and your denials.

Secondly, it says they tested the false apostles, those who said they were apostles. This is really interesting. John MacArthur, who I don't often quote... If you don't know who he is... He has to be in his 80s. I think he took over pastoring the church he's pastoring when he was, like, 28 years old. He has preached verse by verse through

the entire New Testament. So when John MacArthur says something, I'm listening, because he has been doing ministry for 50 years in Southern California.

He said the number-one problem he has seen in Christians in America over the 50 years of his ministry is a lack of spiritual discernment. You wouldn't leave the front door of your house open and just let anyone walk in, would you? Nobody would do that. Spiritually, sometimes, we open up the front door of our lives, and just because it says "Christian..."

See, the danger with false teachers is not what they're teaching, usually; it's what they're failing to teach. False teachers like to talk about heaven, not hell; faith, not repentance; angels, not demons; obedience but not sin. So, they were a serving church. They were a separated church. They were a serious church.

Finally, they were a *sustaining* church. I want you to see this. Look with me at verse 3. ***"I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary."*** We're going to talk about this more in the weeks to come, because there are some churches that are unbelievable at enduring, so I don't want to say too much here. I'll just say something really quickly.

I'll ask you a question. What does it take to discourage you? By the way, Nietzsche said something like, "The character of a man is tested by how much truth he can handle." What does it take to discourage you? I want you to have staying power. Some of you go public with your faith at work, and it's one raised eyebrow, and you're like, "I'm never doing that again." You need to read more church history and more Bible.

Some of you share something on Facebook, and someone from high school makes a weird comment. You're like, "I'm done!" We want to be a sustaining church, a serving church, a serious church, and a separated church.

## **02 CONFRONT & CORRECT: LOST FIRST LOVE**

Now, that was what they did well. I want you to see what they *didn't* do well. Verse 4: ***"But I have this against you..."*** All right. Even before we see it... Do you have a Jesus who can confront you or do you just have a Jesus who's made in your image who basically agrees with everything you do? The Jesus of the Bible can show up and go, "I don't like this about you," and it's personal. "I have this against you."

Here's what he says. You know this verse if you've been in church for a while. This is a famous verse. **"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned..."** Some translations say, "Your first love," but probably the best translation is what's here. **"...the love you had at first."**

Okay. Now do you see why I called them...? They have a good, big head. They have good theology. And they have great hands. They're servant-oriented, and they're doing all of these things. And they have a cold heart, a bad heart. The first thing we're told about them that's bad is that they left the love they had at first.

Now, anytime you talk about love it's kind of like, "Oh no. How do we even talk about love in this culture?" Love in our culture today normally means sentimentality. Love in our culture today means a feeling or an emotion. We're all hoping to fall in love, like it's involuntary and we can't handle it.

I want to talk about what love is biblically. This is so important. After I say this, you might be like, "All right, Kyle. I'm leaving. Thank you. That's what I needed. That's it. I'm heading out. I've got to talk to my kids." Here's what love is. Love has three components: *allegiance*, *action*, and *affection*.

You see it clearly in a wedding ceremony, but you probably see it most clearly in a mom or dad's relationship with their kids, because it's probably the one relationship... Maybe it's spiritual and biological and all that. We get this at the mom or dad to kid level. Here's what this means.

*Allegiance* is if you want to deepen your love, you deepen your commitments. That's why marriage is you stand in front of God and the government and all friends and family and a pastor and your church. And what do you do? You make commitments. Anytime I train young pastors in doing weddings, I'm like, "That's it. That's what the wedding is about."

It's not about the open bar and the band afterward. It's not about how good the hotel is and how wealthy the bride's parents are and how great the party is going to be. The wedding is about one thing. It is about the public vows the bride and groom take. That's it.

Okay. That's the foundation of love: commitment or allegiance. By the way, this is why I say "with parents." Parents just feel this no matter what happens to their kid, no matter how rebellious their kid is, no matter how many problems their kids have. You just feel it. You're like, "I'm in."

*Actions* are all of the things you promise to do and begin to do because of the commitments you've made. Finally, the *affections* are what follow. The problem today is in America we want all of the emotions and all of the affections and all of the feelings without any of the commitment and certainly none of the action.

What love did they lose? He says, "You lost the love you had at first." Christians primarily have three loves. This is simple. Christians have a vertical love (God). Then they have, we might say, two horizontal loves: their love for the church and their love for the world. Let's talk about each of those. Which love did they lose?

Did they lose their love for the world? Let me clarify. You're not supposed to love the value system of the world; you're supposed to love the people of the world. Let me tell you what happens with Christians. This has happened with some of you, and you know this. Instead of loving the world, here are the three common responses that church people, Christians, can have toward the world.

First, apathy. You know that's the opposite of love, right? "I don't really care." It shows up in our lack of prayer for people, in our lack of evangelism, in our lack of meeting their needs, in our lack of thought or concern. It's very easy to become apathetic toward the world. That one is more subtle, and you can't always see it. Another one is "I'm angry at the world. I'm angry at the world because of the way they act and the way they behave and the way they vote."

It's easy to get angry at the world or it's easy to get afraid of the world. I mean, how many families... It's like, "Well, we can't... The kids..." We understand all this. It's like, "I'm worried about my kids and this world and the people around here and what they're doing." So, pretty soon the church becomes a bomb shelter and a holy huddle and has a monastery mindset instead of a love for the world.

Secondly, they might have lost their love for the church. The church should be your first and your primary community. I mean, who does that anymore? Right? It sounds silly that I would even say that. It doesn't have to be Two Cities Church. If you're a Christian, the church should be your first and your primary community, the main place of relationship, responsibility, and discipleship.

By the way, when you're part of a local church, here's what you basically are saying, if you didn't know you were saying this: "I have a special relationship with the other people in this church that I don't have with anyone else. I have certain commitments and responsibilities to these people I don't have to anyone else."

So, maybe not love for the world, maybe not love for the church, but maybe love for Christ himself. It's like, how does that...? Well, you need to become familiar with

forgiveness. So, how do you lose your first love? Where did it go? I think most of us lose it the same way. We lose it by something taking its place. I think God made you and me... We are worshipers, so something is always going to be our first love.

I think there are three things that take away our first love. Sometimes it's something sinful. You know what it is for you. Right? All I have to say is "What's that sinful...?" *Secret*, maybe...*shameful*. *Secret* and *shameful* are the same thing anyway. For some people, there is something. It didn't start out this way. It never does. But you can't treasure sin and treasure Christ in your heart at the same time.

So, if some sin has become prominent in your life, it becomes first. That's for some of you. For some of you, it's just something secondary. It could be a good secondary. It could be, like, wife and kids and husband. Those are all good. They just need to be secondary. It could be something silly.

It could be like pickleball. It's so humiliating and embarrassing sometimes. You're like, "How did this become so important to me? It's ridiculous. How has my soul shrunk to this size?" It happens, though. It's like, "My golf game. Tennis. Cold plunging. How has this become number one in my life?"

It could also be something where you're seeing results. Here's why this is. I had to learn this as somebody who has been in full-time ministry my whole adult life. I realized really early on... My first year of ministry (this was, like, 18 years ago), I got really into working out. I know this is hard for you to believe. It was a long time ago.

I kind of had this moment. I was like, "Why am I so into it, and why are so many of my other friends in ministry so into working out?" I don't claim that I figured it out fully, but it was basically this: it's the only thing we know how to measure. Ministry is hard to measure. Like, "Okay. How are your kids doing with the Lord? How are you doing with repentance in your life? How are all of your relationships that you're trying to share Christ with?" It's really hard. It takes a long time. But I can see results.

### **03 THE CALL: REMEMBER, REPENT, & RETURN**

Jesus tells us what we need to do if we've lost our first love. I want you to see this. Verses 5-6: *"Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."*

So, we had three types of loves: love for world, love for church, and love for Christ. He tells us three things we need to do if we've lost one of those or all three of those. They're usually connected. You love Christ, so you love the world and love the church. They're all connected, but let me give you the three things. You saw them. *Remember, repent, and return.* Easy to remember.

In Genesis, chapter 3, which was a long time ago... That's when sin entered the world. We call it the *fall*. Theologians call it (this is a great phrase) the *noetic effects of the fall*, which are the effects of sin on the brain or on the mind. There are 14 of them, but one of them is that we forget.

So, the first thing we have to do (we'll get to *repentance* and *returning* in a second) is we have to *remember*. What do we have to remember? We have to remember the gospel. I want you to understand the whole reason we do *this*, this worship service, is in large part to remember. You're like, "We sang that song a few weeks ago." I know. We want you to remember it.

Half the time I'm up here I'm like, "Didn't I already talk about this? How do I say the exact same thing to the exact same people in a different way?" It's like, "Oh, yeah. You have to remember." I had a mentor tell me, as a communicator, there are four stages of people getting things.

He said there's, "Oh, wow!" That's stage one. I love that, if I say something and you go, "Ooh!" Which you never do, but every once in a while there's somebody over *here* who goes, "Oh!" and I'm like, "Yes! This is what I live for." That's, "Oh, wow." The second stage of communication is "Oh, yeah." That's also fun. It's like, "Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. Oh, yeah, that was really good."

The third stage is, "Not again." I'm just telling you, that's not fun, but you have to get through "Not again" to get to the final stage of communication, which is "Got it." Every parent knows this. We need to go through "Not again, not again, not again," so I can go, "Got it."

You need to remember the gospel. That's why we sing the songs. That's why we preach the sermons. That's why we do everything we do. You need to remember what Jesus Christ has done for you. Secondly with remembering, you need to remember your testimony. He says, "The love you had at first."

For me, I need to remember being 16 years old. I can remember that moment when I went to school and sat at my lunch table in public high school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and shared with the eight guys at the table that I'd become a Christian. I remember what that felt like.

I'd just gotten my license, and I remember driving to school. I had a New Testament my youth pastor gave me. I was so new in the Lord I thought it said, "New Testament and Palms." I didn't know the *P* was silent. I just remember getting there early, and I would read it. I didn't know you could highlight in your Bible. I would highlight, and I would take a verse and try to apply it.

I remember working at McDonald's. That is not one of my fond memories right there, but I remember working at McDonald's, and on my breaks... We got a 30-minute break. The McDonald's was right next to a Family Christian Bookstore. (They don't have these anymore.) I'd quickly eat my sandwich so I could go and see what books had come out and what new things I could learn and (back in the day there were these things called *CDs*) what *CDs* were out.

You need to remember and you need to *repent*. I want you to hear *repentance* as a positive word. I know it has its negative connotations. Sometimes we have these words and they're negative. It's like, "Agh!" Here's what *repent* means. Your life could be different than it is. Oh, thank God. *Repent* means you could do something about the horrible decisions you've made in the past. That's what Jesus does.

I love what John Piper said. By the way, John Piper is a pastor in his 70s. He said every once in a while... Again, he's in his 70s. He's older. He said every once in a while, you'll need to weep over your life and all of the sins you've done and all of the missed opportunities you've had. He said, "But when you're done weeping over your life, wash your face, get up, and trust God."

That's the hope of repentance. Listen. Repentance is sometimes, maybe often, removing something from your life, but I would say more often it's reordering something in your life. "You know what? Money has become too important. I don't remove it; I reorder it. My hobbies and personal health have become too important. It's time to reorder it. Christ needs to be number one."

The final thing he says is *return*. That's interesting. The way we go forward in the Christian life is often to go back. I think it was Martin Luther who said the way to progress in the Christian life is always to begin again. What do you need to start doing again? I had a guy years ago... He was my boss' boss' boss. He was in campus ministry, a guy named Joe \_\_\_\_\_ (45:01). Great guy. He has been in campus ministry for 25 years.

I remember talking to him about five years ago. He said, "Kyle, I'm memorizing Scripture again. I hadn't done that in a while." He said, "Now I'm doing it for the right reasons. I learned this discipline a long time ago, and I did it to do it. Now I've



returned, and it means so much to me. I'm beginning to memorize Scripture for the right reasons."

Where was the last place you met with God? Go back there. For some of you, there's a person you need to call. Some of you need to get in the car or get on a plane. There's a place you need to visit. There's a book you need to read. There's a song you need to listen to. There are still 5 or 10 songs that, when I put them on, transport me back to the year 2001.

I want to close by seeing what Jesus ends saying to the church. He always ends with a promise here. He says, **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."** At the end of each time he points us to heaven.

The reason I'm glad we started with this church, if I could just speak a *rhema* moment to our church right now... Here's my fear, guys. My fear is if there's any of the seven churches (and I've read all of them) that you and I are most likely to become, it is the church at Ephesus.

It is a church that has, hopefully, good theology and good Bible teaching and is servant-hearted. We have the "serve one, attend one" culture, and we're doing all of these great works, but at the same time we have lost our first love. If there's one thing this first church teaches us... It's very simple. It teaches us that when you lose your love you lose your light.

Jesus says to the church (I didn't show you this part; we didn't have enough time), "Hey, listen. If this doesn't change, if you don't return to your first love, I'm going to remove your lampstand." Did you know that Jesus does that to churches? I wish I could put us all in some big van and we could drive around the city.

We could say, "Hey, listen. I know they have a building, and I know they have staff and some programs, but if it's not obvious to everybody else, it is to every true believer...that church is dead. That church has been dead for years. I don't know exactly when they lost their love, but it's obvious that they've lost their light."

We want to be a salty and bright lighthouse in our city. We so desire to be a counterculture. We desire to be an attractive alternative, and to do that we can't lose our love. So, I just want to give us a moment. Wherever you are, I want you to just take this personal. It's the beginning of the year. You can still be a different, godlier version of yourself than you were at the beginning of this year.

If you'll close your eyes and bow your head, I want to give you a chance to think about the three things Jesus calls us to do. The first thing he says is *remember*. Some of you need to have a Peter moment. Do you remember what happened with Peter? After doing something three times that he knew was wrong, the moment that changed his life... It said he remembered the words of Jesus and wept. For some of you it's going to be... We know this. Books don't change people's lives. Paragraphs don't change people's lives. Sentences do. Sometimes it's just going to be a verse.

I pray right now, Holy Spirit, that you would take a verse and apply it to each person's heart in this room and you would help them to remember. Lord, I pray for repentance. Help us to see *repentance* as a positive word. Help us right now... This is the beautiful thing. We can repent right where we are. We can remove something by faith. We can reorder something by faith. Would you help us to do it? Lord, would you help us to return? Lord, as we stand and as we sing in a minute, would we return?

I want to say to the church... In just a moment, as we sing, there are going to be prayer teams on both sides. For some of you, the way you're going to go back, like Jesus said, is by coming forward. You're going to come forward and say, "Pray." Two Cities Church will be a place where people discover and rediscover their first love.

Lord, would you do it? Would you do it for your glory? Would you do it for our good? Would you do it for the good of the city? Would you make us bright and salty? Would you deepen our affections, our allegiance, and our actions toward you, toward each other, and toward a lost and dying world? We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.