

Remember Your First Love

Revelation 2:1-7

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A couple months ago, we received a notification from the Quad Cities Times that Edgewood was voted the “Best Place to Worship” for 2025. At first, I smiled, and then I immediately became uncomfortable because there are many solid gospel-preaching churches in the Quad Cities. On top of that, it doesn’t really matter what people say about Edgewood. What matters is what Jesus says about us.

Imagine for a moment that Jesus Himself walked into the worship center right now. What would He say to us if He stood here visibly and started walking among us, with eyes like blazing fire and a voice like rushing waters? Because He sees beliefs and behavior, what would He commend? Since He perfectly perceives our motives and our manner of living, what would He correct? What would He warn us about?

That’s exactly what the risen, radiant, reigning, and returning Christ does in Revelation 2–3 as personal letters from Him are sent to seven real, historical churches in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). These messages contain both sweet and, at times, sharp words from the Head of the Church to His people.

For the next seven weeks, we’ll seek to understand and apply the message Jesus has for those churches, for our church, and for each of us personally because the church is not ‘they,’ but ‘us.’

As I’ve been reading these chapters, I’ve been encouraged and convicted. Matt Bowman, one of our deacons, passed along what Charles Spurgeon shared with his congregation before preaching on Revelation 2:1-7. It will make us uncomfortable; but that’s a good thing.

I feel that I who preach shall this night condemn myself. And my prayer before I entered this pulpit was that I might fearlessly discharge my duty, that I might deal honestly with my own heart, and that I might preach, knowing myself to be the chief culprit, and you each in your own measure have offended in this respect, even though none of you so grievously as I have done. I pray that God the Holy Spirit, through His renewings, may apply the Word, not merely to

your hearts, but to mine—that I may return to my first love and that you may return with me.

Before going further, I want to make sure we're in the right place and have the right posture to hear these words from the One who is alive forevermore. I've been deeply stirred by what Nancy Guthrie writes: *“Will we deflect, defend, or dismiss what He has to say? Will we sit in the room with our fellow believers inwardly pointing a finger at others who really need to hear what Jesus has to say while assuming that we are doing just fine? Or will we do what He calls us to do even though it will be costly, humbling, and hard? Are you willing to put yourself, right now, into a posture of humility and reception of what Jesus wants to show you about yourself?”*

Before Christ pours out His judgments on the world beginning in Revelation 6, He first evaluates His church, fulfilling what we read in 1 Peter 4:17: ***“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God...”*** Jesus inspects His church before He indicts the world and He cleans His house before He judges the neighborhood.

In my preparation for this sermon, I listened to a message by Pastor Daniel Batarseh from Chicago. After studying what Jesus said to these seven churches, he made the following observations.

- Jesus is passionate about the purity of His church. He longs for every church to be victorious conquerors.
- Christ evaluates churches much differently than we do. His definition of success is often different than ours.
- Jesus is deeply interested in our works. He expects us to serve Him whole heartedly.
- Satan ferociously opposes the church. Satan is mentioned five times in these two chapters.
- Christ desires for us to be eternal minded and to be ready for His return.
- Jesus compliments before He corrects. This is a good practice that applies to parenting and in relationships.
- Behind every command is a promise that He will help us do what He is calling us to do.

Let's consider the pattern followed in the letters to these seven historical churches (drawn from the ESV Study Bible):

1. Jesus describes Himself in terms from chapter 1. For example, listen to 2:8: ***“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’”*** We see that Jesus, in His person and in His promises, is what we need most. As we learned last weekend, our starting point must always be Christology. Jesus alone is the solution to all our problems. He is the author, the answer, and our final authority.

2. Jesus introduces His diagnosis of their condition by using this statement of omniscience: ***“I know...”*** The diagnoses are both positive (except for Sardis and Laodicea) and negative (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia). Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. These churches were located on a major postal/travel route:
 - Ephesus: the loveless church.
 - Smyrna: the persecuted church.
 - Pergamum: the compromising church.
 - Thyatira: the tolerant church.
 - Sardis: the dead church.
 - Philadelphia: the faithful church.
 - Laodicea: the lukewarm church.

3. All seven churches are commanded to hear and heed ***“what the Spirit says to the churches”*** (2:7). While these letters deal with actual conditions of these churches in John’s day, they are also representative of all churches.

4. Blessings and rewards are promised to ***“the one who conquers”*** or ***“overcomes,”*** foreshadowing the final visions in the closing chapters.

Here’s our main idea for today: *Faithfulness to Christ is not measured by how much labor we do for Him, but by how deep our love is for Him and others.*

1. The Authority of Christ. The place to start is to make sure we have submitted to the absolute authority of Christ as we see in Revelation 2:1: ***“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.’”***

The seven stars are symbolic of the angels, or messengers (pastors), of the seven churches, and the lampstands represent the seven churches themselves. We see

Jesus as powerful because ***“He holds the seven stars in His right hand,”*** and He is personal because He walks among the seven churches. The picture here is of Jesus functioning like a priest in the Holy Place of the temple as He cleans, refills, and relights the lamps so they continue to burn brightly for Him.

Ephesus was known as the “Supreme Metropolis of Asia” and was about the size of the Quad Cities, with several highways converging along with a major river and seaport. It was the center of worship for the fertility goddess Artemis (Diana). The temple to her was bigger than two football fields and came to be known as one of the “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.” Ephesus was saturated with pagan worship, with some sources indicating there were altars or temples to 14 different gods. Along with emperor worship, the city was filled with immorality and idolatry.

Paul, Priscilla and Aquila started the Ephesian church and spent time teaching the believers (Acts 18:18-19). The powerful preacher Apollos partnered with them (Acts 18:24-26), the Apostle Paul spent three years encouraging and equipping them (Acts 20:31), Paul’s protégé Timothy served as pastor at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3), and according to the testimony of the early church, the Apostle John also pastored this congregation. By all indications, this was a growing church that was very well-taught but had started living off the prestige of their past.

Jesus ***“walks among”*** His church, which means He walks about patrolling and protecting His people. He is intimately aware of all that is going on in the churches. The radiant and resurrected Christ is right here, walking among Edgewood and walking with each of us every day. That’s both comforting and convicting, isn’t it?

2. The Approval of Christ. In verses 2-3, Jesus commended the church in Ephesus. The Savior celebrated their...

- **Serving.** Jesus said, ***“I know your works...”*** He sees how you serve and commends you for it. You may think your ministry doesn’t matter, that no one sees what you’re doing. You can have confidence that Jesus knows. 2 Timothy 2:19 says, ***“The Lord knows those who are His.”*** He knows who belongs to Him and He celebrates what we do for Him.

I continue to be impressed with the number of servants God has assembled at Edgewood. At the EdgeWomen’s event this week, they made over 60 cards and put together Valentine’s Gift Bags for those who can’t make it to

church. If you want to get involved in serving, there are many ways to do so, like serving dinner or greeting people at Celebrate Recovery. We also have needs in our nursery, Awana, and preschool ministry. We're specifically looking for more men to get involved.

I attended the first part of the EdgeKids training time this past Sunday. I'm so grateful for Marcy, Tiffany, and Kate. As I greeted people while they were in line to get their food, I tried to thank each one for their selfless service (I took some razzing for holding up the line). It hit me that each one is serving because they love Jesus and they love young image bearers.

- **Sacrificing.** Jesus also sees the sacrifices people make for Him. The word *"toil"* refers to fatigue, weariness, and exhaustion. I see examples of this at Edgewood all the time. This week, an Edgewood member asked for a box of Bibles and a box of Anchor for the Soul books to distribute to the homeless shelter that is now open in the old Kone Building. She's bringing lunch for 60 homeless people on Sunday.
- **Steadfastness.** The phrase *"patient endurance"* refers to staying steadfast amid problems. This is restated in [verse 3](#): *"I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, you have not grown weary."*

It's important for us to not grow weary in our commitment to make disciples of Jesus in our families, among our neighbors and among the nations. We just sent Emma J to central Asia, and this weekend we'll be sending Addy Holmquist to serve in Mexico again. In addition, Steve Curry, Ethan Curry, Terry Hartley, and Lance Heuer will be heading to El Monte in Mexico this week to prepare for a group of 100 men from a church in California who will be serving there in a few weeks.

As a result of Go Con, we also have four other teams headed to serve with a number of our global Go Team Partners.

- India (March 13-22)
- Mexico (June 20-27)
- Kenya (July 22-August 2)
- Japan (late August/early September)

Amazingly, counting Emma and Addy, 41 of our members will be serving cross-culturally this year! Special thanks to Pastor Kyle and the

EdgeMissions team for organizing these trips. BTW, there's still room on the June Mexico trip.

While these members are committed to go, it's essential that many of us give so they can go. I'd like to challenge everyone to consider supporting at least one individual or one team this year. *If every giver gives, every goer can go.* I realize that it's not possible for everyone, but would you at least pray about giving a small amount? To make it easy to give digitally, we've created a special section under the "Give" tab on the website and app. I'll walk us through it now. You could also write a check to Edgewood and put the name of the individual or the country on the memo line.

- **Spiritual discernment.** While the Ephesians were able to bear up under challenges, according to the second half of verse 2, they did not ***"bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false."*** They refused to tolerate false doctrine and false teachers. Even today, churches are being rocked by allegations of immorality and spiritual manipulation involving leaders who claim apostolic authority. Some have even been accused of gathering publicly available personal information online and presenting it as a supposed "word of knowledge" from God.

Friends, this is why discernment matters. We live in a time when false teaching and heresy is literally in our pockets. With a few clicks, we can access countless sermons, podcasts, prophecies, and opinions. Much of this is helpful, some is harmful, and others are dangerously deceptive. We must test everything against the truth of God's Word.

In verse 6, Jesus commended them for ***"hating the works of the Nicolaitans."*** While it's difficult to know exactly what the Nicolaitans believed, it's likely they had worked out a compromise with pagan beliefs so they could have liberty to practice idolatry and immorality. Notice the Ephesians hated their *practices*, not the people themselves. They stayed committed to the Word while combating the world, remaining doctrinally pure without capitulating to the culture.

Faithfulness to Christ is not measured by how much labor we do for Him, but by how deep our love is for Him and others.

3. The Abandonment of Love. The Ephesians were commended for many things. Like Edgewood, they had a lot of good ministries going on, but Jesus had a chilling word of rebuke for them in verse 4: ***“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”*** The word **“but”** means, *“despite all that”* or *“nevertheless.”* To be **“against”** means to be *“down upon.”*

Here’s an unsettling question: *Could it be that Jesus has something against Edgewood?* There’s a lot of serving, sacrificing, steadfastness, and spiritual discernment here but maybe we’re missing something. Our doctrine can be precise while our devotion could be without passion. I wonder what Jesus has against each of us individually. Our biggest problem is not what’s happening in our culture but what’s happening in our own hearts.

Notice the word **“the”** before love. This is not some emotional, syrupy kind of sentimentality but is *agape*, or unconditional love. They had deep devotion at the beginning, but had drifted and backslidden. One sermon title captures it well: *“Warm Hands but Cold Hearts.”* They labored but it was not out of love for God or others. If love is not the basis for our serving or sacrificing, 1 Corinthians 13:3 says it is worthless: ***“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”***

A church which seemed to have everything was missing the main thing. Listen again to the words of Jesus found in Mark 12:30-31: ***“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”***

Notice they didn’t lose their first love, they *left* it. The word **“abandoned”** refers to *“a definite and sad departure; to disregard, let go, or dismiss.”* Literally it means, *“Your first love you have left.”* This word was used of divorce, which is no coincidence since the Bible describes our relationship with Jesus like a marriage between a husband and wife. They had left the love they had at **“first,”** which means, *“first in rank and importance.”* They loved their church, their activities, and their schedules. They just didn’t love Jesus more than these things.

They didn’t stop loving Jesus. They just stopped loving Him *most*. This often happens slowly over time, like a slow leak where activity replaces affection.

Interestingly, the word **“love”** is used twenty times in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. They had heard about the primacy of love but had abandoned it. I’m

reminded of what Pastor Tim Green shared on his last weekend here: *“Keep the main thing the main thing: Love God and love others.”*

4. The Appeal of Christ. In verse 5, we’re given some specific remedies to recapture the love we’ve left behind. When we lose something we don’t know where to find it; but when we leave something, we know where to find it.

- **Remember.** To *“remember”* means to *“put in your mind by recalling.”* We’re called to remember so we can recalibrate our lives according to what’s being remembered. When the prodigal son was eating pig slop soup, he remembered what life was like back in his father’s home (Luke 15:17-19).

To *“remember”* is a present active imperative, meaning to be *“continually mindful”* of *“where you have fallen.”* The idea is we’re to *“keep on remembering.”* Was there a time you were closer to Christ? Have you allowed some spiritual slippage to take place? Have you compromised your convictions? You won’t want to change unless you have some holy dissatisfaction about where you are now.

- **Repent.** Repentance can be defined as turning from sin to the Savior, resulting in a change of attitude, affection, and action. It’s time to turn from just going through the motions, indifference, religious formalism, and our legalistic routines. This is an urgent appeal from Jesus which literally means, *“to change instantly before it’s too late!”* Turn from the direction you’re going and go in another one.

Our number one need is to love Jesus with everything we have by turning from those things which have taken the primary place reserved only for Him. Spurgeon writes: *“It is the loss of your first love that makes you seek the comfort of your bodies instead of the prosperity of your souls.”*

- **Return.** Listen to the middle phrase of verse 5: *“...and do the works you did at first.”* To *“do the works”* means, *“to produce action.”* The word *“works”* refers to laboring. Notice we’re not told to go back and *“feel the feelings we used to have”* but to do the works we used to do. If you want to get your first love back, go back and practice the spiritual disciplines you used to do so you can keep your faith fresh and your love vibrant. It’s time to return to the need for gathering, for growing, for giving, and for going with the gospel.

As the Vanderbloemen search team works at identifying candidates for our Celebrate Recovery and Counseling Pastor and a Young Adults pastor, our trust is in the Lord to provide these positions. Our consultant is coming this week to meet with the Celebrate Recovery leadership team, the Mainspring Leadership team, the staff, and the deacons. He's already hit the ground running but we're holding on to what Psalm 121:2 says, "***My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.***" Our task is to seek the Lord and to pray for God's provision. We'll be making an announcement soon about some upcoming church-wide prayer times.

- **Removal.** Notice how verse 5 ends: "***If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.***" Jesus is saying something like, "*Remember, repent, and return or I will come upon you suddenly and remove your witness.*" When He comes, it will be swift and sure.

The word "**remove**" means, "*to cause to go, to move from a place.*" Their lack of love was so serious it threatened the very existence of their church. Someone said it like this: "*A church that loses its love, will undoubtedly lose its light.*" The lampstand reminds us of our role as light in a dark world. A church that loses its witness will eventually lose its existence. The light went out for the Ephesian church because they left their first love. Tragically, their legacy is now left for archaeologists to discover. In that area of Turkey today, Muslims make up 98% of the population.

Sadly, a church may continue meeting long after its witness has been removed. The same thing could happen to Edgewood if we're not vigilant and diligent. I'm reminded of this quote from A.W. Tozer, "*If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.*"

- **Redemption.** While Jesus urged the Ephesian church to repent, He also personalized the message for individual believers. We must pray for revival in our country and in our church, but we must first be revived ourselves. That's why Jesus uses the personal words, "**he,**" "**him,**" and "**the one**" in verse 7: "***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.” Brothers and sisters, what is the Spirit saying to you? Will you hear and heed Him today?

The word “***paradise***” initially referred to a walled garden or royal park, a place of beauty, abundance, rest, and delight. Over time, it came to represent the ideal place of blessing, renewal, and restoration.

Joe Stowell notes that in one of the paradise gardens outside Ephesus stood a large, flourishing tree that many believed symbolized hope and life. In a city saturated with pagan worship and spiritual confusion, that tree represented the deep human longing for renewal, restoration, and redemption.

That image connects powerfully with Jesus’ promise of paradise to the Ephesian church. What people were searching for in a physical symbol, Jesus offered in the reality of redemption. He alone is the true source of life. The Tree of Life is not merely what was lost in Eden; it is what is restored through Christ.

The Tree of Life first appears in Genesis 2:9, planted in the center of the Garden of Eden. It was a majestic, life-giving tree whose fruit sustained life and fellowship with God. After Adam and Eve sinned, cherubim guarded the way to it (Genesis 3:22–24).

But through another tree, Jesus bore our curse on the cross (Galatians 3:13) and reopened paradise. Revelation 2:7 promises that conquering overcomers will one day eat from this tree in God’s paradise, experiencing full restoration, no more curse, and eternal life in His presence. Revelation 22:2 promises: ***“Also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”***

Are you ready to repent and receive Christ so you can be released from the record of your sins? Only then will you find the refreshment you are searching for and experience the restoration God alone can bring to your life.

Lord, I admit I am a sinner and deserve Your just judgment. I repent from trying to follow my own way and now turn to You as the only way. I believe Jesus died in my place on the cross and rose again on the third day and now I receive Him into my life. Please save me from my sins and from Your righteous wrath. I want to be born again so I place all my trust in You and

You alone. If there's anything in my life You don't like, please get rid of it so I can love You first. I pray this in the name of Jesus, the One who is both Lord and Christ. Amen.

Communion

1 Corinthians 11:28 says we're not to take communion flippantly: ***“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”*** The bread represents His body, and the cup is a reminder of His blood which paid the ransom price for our forgiveness and freedom.

Confession/Prayer Time

Faithfulness to Christ is not measured by how much labor we do for Him, but by how deep our love is for Him and others.

Someone said it powerfully: *“Don't tell me what you love. Tell me where you spend your time, and I'll tell you what you love. Tell me what you think about, and I'll tell you what you love. Tell me where you spend your money, and I'll tell you what you love.”*

Please close your eyes as we ponder a few questions.

What is it you need to repent from right now? Have you left your first love? Is there a sin you've been justifying? Are you compromising your convictions? Have you been drinking too much? Using drugs? Committing adultery? Are you involved in a sexual sin? Do you have a judgmental heart? Been gossiping lately? Have you been withholding forgiveness from someone? Have you put off asking someone to forgive you? Has bitterness hardened your heart? Have you allowed a person, a pleasure, or a possession to become an idol in your heart? Have you been on a slow fade in your faith walk? Have you been coasting? If so, it's time for us to remember, repent, and return so Jesus does not remove our witness as we live out the redemption He has provided for us.

We practice open communion, which means you don't need to be an Edgewood member to participate, but you do need to be a born-again believer.

Our deacons and pastors will distribute the trays by passing them down each row. When the tray comes to you, simply lift a cup straight out. You'll notice there are

two cups stacked together. Give a little twist and hold one in each hand until everyone is served so we can partake together.

BTW, the bread we use is gluten free, and we use grape juice instead of wine.

Distribution of Elements

Forever family, before we take the bread, let's focus on these words from 1 Corinthians 11:23-24: ***“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, He broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”***

Before we drink from the cup, consider these words from 1 Corinthians 11:25-26: ***“In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”***

Mexico Commissioning

El Monte: Terry Hartley, Steve Curry, Ethan Curry, and Lance Heuer

Tijuana: Addy Holmquist