

There's an old saying which says, "The good is ever the enemy of the best." There's nowhere that this is truer than in the kingdom of God; in the lives of Christians and in the Church. Think about it, it's one of the Devil's oldest schemes. Scripture tells us that we are not unaware of his schemes. Wherever God is at work, be certain that Satan is not far behind.

Any cursory study of the New Testament will show that the Devil employs many tactics as he tries to thwart the work of God. Whenever he can he tries to introduce false doctrine into the church. Where this does not work he introduces schisms and division, knowing that a house divided against itself cannot stand. With a nasty tool chest full of things like gossip, jealousy, suspicion and pride, he causes God's people to take their eyes off of Jesus and His commandments and causes them instead to focus on earthly things which have no eternal value. When God's people refuse to allow sin in their midst Satan often brings persecution and difficulties against the church, all in an effort to discourage and dishearten God's people.

When these tactics are not completely successful there is another tool he uses to stop the forward progress of a particular church or congregation. It is perhaps the most insidious tool, because it is masked behind the façade of success. When he cannot deceive us, divide us or daunt us what he will often do is divert us. The fervour we once had for Jesus is replaced with an acceptance of things as they are. Satan wants us to become so satisfied with where we are, with what we are doing and with what we have accomplished, that instead of maintaining a red hot passion for Christ and for His kingdom, we would lose our zeal for Christ and His kingdom;

replacing a once consuming internal passion with a complacency that is content with the religious status quo

Of all the endeavours of humanity there is only one which carries an absolute promise of God's unending blessing: The expansion of the Kingdom of God. When we share our faith and make disciples for Christ, He has promised to bless our efforts, to multiply them and to give us success. But why is it then UK Church membership has declined from 10.6 million in 1930 to 5.5 Million in 2010, or as a percentage of the population; from about 30% to 11.2%.

By 2013, this had declined further to 5.4 million (10.3%). If current trends continue, membership will fall to 8.4% of the population by 2025. (faithsurvey.co.uk for further info)

Our text this morning paints a picture of a church; A picture which in many ways shows us why so many churches today are in decline; a picture, not only of a church but of individual Christians who somewhere along the way allowed the good to replace the best in their spiritual lives.

We must be vigilant. We must be on guard, corporately and individually, against losing our passion, we must guard against becoming what the church at Ephesus had become. That is why our text has been recorded in God's word. It is a prophetic word, it is a preventative word, it is a prescriptive word. God does not want us to become like Ephesus. It is to this end that I speak to you this morning.

The City of Ephesus was mighty and majestic. It was a centre of tourism and trade. Four major trade routes went through this city, making it somewhat cosmopolitan in the ancient world. It was a wealthy city and yet a very pagan city, as it was home to the largest temple in the ancient world, the pagan temple of Artemis.

Acts 20 gives us background on this church where it tells us that Paul had preached among them for three years. We also have the book of Ephesians to help us understand the profound degree to which they had been taught the truth. They understood who they were in Christ, how to walk with Christ and how to engage in spiritual warfare. Their problem was not their failure to understand good doctrine, their problem was not that they lacked perseverance. This church existed during one of the most difficult times in all of Christian history. Beginning in 54 A.D. with the emperor Nero, there was widespread persecution of Christians. The Ephesian church had refused to bow the knee to Caesar and had stood firm in the midst of persecution.

So here in verses 1-3 Christ commends them. The church at Ephesus was not idle. On the contrary they were very busy working for the Lord. Their calendar was full. People in their neighbourhood would have looked at them and said, "Crumbs, that church must be amazing its full of good Christians, they sure are busy."

And not only were they busy for the Lord. They took a strong stand against heresy. They were well grounded in the word. No doubt their pastor was an expository preacher, giving them clear application points to every sermon. They had withstood persecution and not fainted. Outwardly everything looked great.

And for these good things Christ commends them. Nothing goes unnoticed by God. He knows all that we do. But there is a powerful insight to be learned here. Mere works are not enough to please the Lord. He wants more than outward compliance. What Jesus wants is a heart that is changed. That is why after commending them in v 2-3 he counsels them in verses 4-5.

Look at verse 4. "But I have this against you, that you have lost your first love."

Christ counsels them to return to their first love; to keep Jesus first in their hearts. They had started out strong, but over time things had begun to change. A generation had come and gone since Paul had preached to them. While they had remained faithful to the word of God, and had endured hardship, the likes of which most of us could not understand, something was lacking. They had lost their passion. The fervour for Christ, the passionate love that had motivated them and burned within their hearts had given way to a mechanical orthodoxy, a ritualistic form of service that lacked enthusiasm and zeal.

What happens when we lose our first love? What happens when the passion we once had for Christ is replaced by legalism or by self-righteousness, or by a mechanical form of Christianity that contains all the externals but lacks the internal passion the once stirred our hearts and moved us to love for Christ? *What Happens? We focus on the form instead of the substance of our faith*

- **We become infatuated with knowledge in itself instead of holiness.** Personal holiness is no longer our quest -knowledge, something we can attain for ourselves, replaces God's presence and Lordship in our life. What we know becomes more important than what we are.
- **We become comfortable with the Holy instead of being in awe of it.**
- **We lose our evangelistic zeal and see the world as our enemy instead of our mission field.** This is what causes churches to become inward looking instead of outward looking. When churches grow cold they are more concerned with maintaining their tradition than they are with seeing people come to salvation.

- **We become insensitive to the Holy Spirit, and thus become dulled to the small sins that distract us.** When we are passionately in love with Jesus, we are sensitive to grieving His Spirit, but when we become cold, we lose that sensitivity. Gossip, pride, jealousy, bitterness, attitudes of spiritual one-up-man-ship, and a host of other ungodly things, are allowed to dwell within us, because we are insensitive to how much these things displease God.
- **We become content with what we are instead of being driven to become more like Christ.** We allow other things to sit on the throne of our lives, and relegate Christ to a lesser place of importance. Mind you, we still give lip service to Christ as Lord, but in our hearts, other things reign. It may be success, it may be power, pride, prestige or pleasure, but something else sits on the throne of our lives.
- **We begin to love something or someone more than we love Christ.** This is the bottom line. We become dispassionate and cool in our relationship with Christ. What kind of relationship do you think Stephen, the first martyr had? Do you think it was a formal, ritualistic relationship, just going through the motions but lacking fervour and zeal? That's not the kind of relationship that causes someone to die for Jesus. What kind of relationship do you think Paul had with Jesus? When he was beaten and left for dead, when he was in prison and knew he was to be executed?

Compare that with the kind of relationship many Christians have with Jesus today. They find little or no time for Him on a daily basis. Instead of being concerned about the things that concern Him, they are more concerned about themselves and their personal desires. Unwilling to give all they are and all they have to Jesus, they are unwilling to be inconvenienced for Jesus. They do not tithe, because that might deny them some of the material things that make their life more comfortable. They do not witness, for that would cause others to think they

were fanatical. They are more willing to give their time, energy and money to a sporting event or some sort of entertainment, then they are to the things of God. Life for them is about self advancement, not about the kingdom of God. And they wonder why they have no spiritual power. They wonder why they have not sensed the presence of God in their life for a mighty long time?

They are only willing to give as much of themselves and their substance to Christ as they absolutely have to in order to convince themselves that they are a good Christian. Christ never asked for part of our lives, **He asks for all of it.** He never asked for a place in our heart, **He asks for absolute rule and reign in our hearts.** He never asked to be one of many passions; **He asks to be the consuming passion of our lives.**

It is a dangerous thing to go through the motions of Christianity without a passionate love for Christ.

- It sets the wrong example for new Christians, causing them to have to backslide to get into fellowship with the church.
- It teaches our children a distorted lesson on what it means to be a Christian. And this coldness has a tendency to become self-perpetuating.
- It causes us to become content with less than God's best, denying us the true riches of our life in Christ.

What Jesus wants is for us to love Him like He loves us. He demonstrated that love for us on the cross. Jesus suffered and died for us, bearing our sins on Calvary's cross, not because He was forced to, but because of His love for us and His desire to bring us into relationship with the Father.

Jesus has never lost His passion for us. His love for us burns white hot. His desire to be in relationship with us is as strong today as it was when He made us, it is as passionate today as it was when He hung there on the cross and said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus loves us and He wants us to return that love. We the Church, are His bride. He loves us like a husband loves the wife of youth. But how sad it is when that love is unrequited; when it is not returned.

Today Jesus is saying, remember from where you have fallen, return to your first deeds and the life to which you were called in Christ.

But, if they decide to disregard what Christ has told them, there are consequences.

Look at verses 5-7. Christ cautions them - If they don't repent, if they don't return to their first love, He will remove the fire of His Spirit from their midst.

Oh, you may still have your buildings, you will still have your programs, your busy schedule and all the externals. You may still be able to attract new people with pretty facilities and clever how-to sermons but the power of God will be missing. God will take His hand off of the church and leave us to go through the motions. What a tragic picture this paints for us: A group of people going through the motions of Christianity, without the living God in their midst. Could there be anything more empty or sad?

Whatever happened to the church at Ephesus? Today the ruins of that ancient city lie under the murk and mire of a swamp. The church at Ephesus died, and the city died around it.

The truth of the matter is that a church is made up of individuals. The passion of the church will never be any greater than the collective passion of her members. If we are on fire for Christ, that passion will be reflected in our church. If we grow cold in our love for Jesus, that coldness will be evident in our fellowship.

This is why the message, although addressed to the church as a whole, comes down to the individual here in verse 7. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

This is where this message speaks to each of us as individuals.

In conclusion, What is God saying to you this morning? I believe He is asking each of us to do the same thing He asked of the church at Ephesus. He is asking to remember where you once were. He is counselling us to come back to the passion we once had for Jesus.

Go back to that moment when you first met Jesus. Remember the love you felt, the stirring in your heart, the adoration you had for our Saviour? Do you remember how grateful you were for the forgiveness of sins? Do you remember how at that moment nothing else mattered, only Jesus?

This morning in these conditions of lockdown, God wants you and me to go back and remember that moment in time. And having that in our memory He wants us to return. He wants us to come back to Him; to come back to our first love, to the place and time in our lives to where He was everything to us. That's where He wants us this morning and always. And then He wants each and every one of us to determine how we can individually and as His church bring others to that state too.

Amen