

UNRAVELLING THE BOOK OF REVELATION | SESSION 12

THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS:

RETURNING TO FIRST LOVE

(REV. 2:1-7)



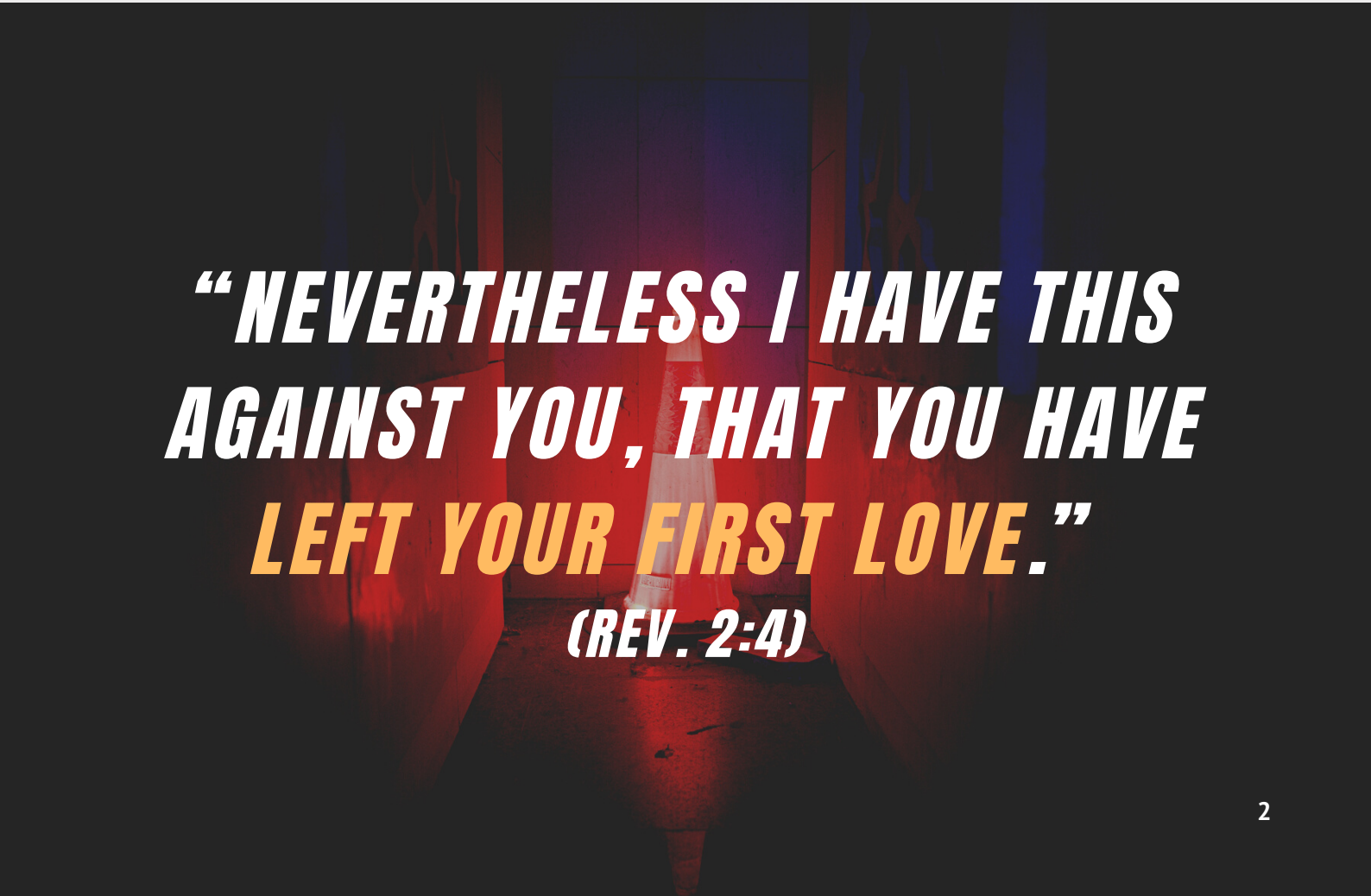
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The year was AD 90.

Jesus was addressing the most cutting-edge church, a church that sparked off one of the greatest revivals of all time, a revival that spread throughout the entire Roman province of Asia, leading to multitudes coming to know the Lord. Everyone in Asia heard the word of God through the revival in this city (Acts 19:10,17-20,26)!

Jesus affirmed them for working hard, for holding fast and staying steady for decades despite pressure. And for not tolerating false teachings and doctrinal compromises.

Sounds like the perfect church, doesn't it? Yet hear what Jesus said to the Church of Ephesus,



***“NEVERTHELESS I HAVE THIS
AGAINST YOU, THAT YOU HAVE
LEFT YOUR FIRST LOVE.”
(REV. 2:4)***



Woah, this is really strong! Jesus was not saying it harshly. Rather He was speaking with much tenderness and grace to a church that He dearly loves.

You see, God deeply values our relationship with Him. His primary assignment for every one of us on this earth is to grow in our love for Him. Ultimately, when we stand before the Lord at the Judgment Seat, He is not going to ask us about the size of our ministry, but the size of our heart response towards Him!

Growing in our love for Jesus has to be our primary conversation topic with Him throughout our entire life, though it is not the only one. The fire of love in our hearts has to be kept burning!

Before going further, let me first give you a brief background of the Church of Ephesus. It was the largest city and the capital of the Roman province of Asia. It was a major financial centre, a leading sea port, and a centre for idol worship.

In Revelation 2:1, Jesus came and introduced Himself as the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.

The right hand of God speaks of His loving kindness and His favour (Ps. 17:7).

The word “**hold**” is a statement of endearment and a statement of intimacy. It speaks of Jesus’ tenderness and commitment towards us. It reveals how much He treasures us. He will lead us, protect us and uphold us in our weakness, even through the darkest hour.

The picture of Jesus **walking** in the midst of the seven golden lampstands tells us that **He is deeply involved in our lives and ministry.** The word “**walk**” speaks of His desire to have an intimate relationship and partnership with us.

Similarly, the word “**I know**” in verse 2 is a powerful statement of intimacy. Jesus knew the Ephesians by name just like He knew Moses (Ex. 33:17). He cared for them deeply and He wanted them to know that their works and labour mattered to Him.

Jesus went on to affirm the church of Ephesus for being diligent and dedicated. They did not become weary, neither did they quit. Instead, they persevered under tremendous pressures for decades, all the while maintaining their zeal and fervency. They also did not tolerate false teachings and doctrines that lead to moral compromises.

This is evidenced by them **taking a stand against the teaching of the Nicolaitans**. Nicolaitans were the followers of Nicolas, a deacon in Jerusalem who fell into error (Acts 6:5). They did not teach the need for restraint of fleshly indulgence. This false teaching of grace is known as antinomianism. It allows for people to continue sinning without the need for repentance, and Jesus made known His strong displeasure towards this wrong teaching (Rev. 2:6).



Others have interpreted the name Nicolaitan to mean “conquering or ruling over the people” as “nikao” means “to conquer” and “laos” means “the people”. This view refers to a church system that **inappropriately exalts leaders with an authoritarian or control spirit over the people they serve**. This is not Biblical as there is only one King and church leaders are but caretakers of His people.

If verses 4 and 5 of Revelation 2 were to be omitted, the church of Ephesus would appear to be the ideal church.

**BUT THERE IS
SOMETHING DEEPER
THAT JESUS THE
BRIDEGROOM REALLY
WANTED - IT IS THE
FIRST LOVE OF HIS
BRIDE.**



In Greek, the order of the words of Revelation 2:4 is especially emphatic, *"Thy first love thou hast left."* You could literally feel the tenderness, longing and grace in Jesus' heart when He said that.

To quote John Walvoord,

"THIS COOLING OF HEARTS... WAS A DANGEROUS FORERUNNER OF SPIRITUAL APATHY WHICH LATER WAS TO ERASE ALL CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY IN THIS IMPORTANT CENTRE OF CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE."

Indeed, the lampstand of the Church of Ephesus was eventually taken away (Rev. 2:5), and the church ceased to exist a few centuries later!

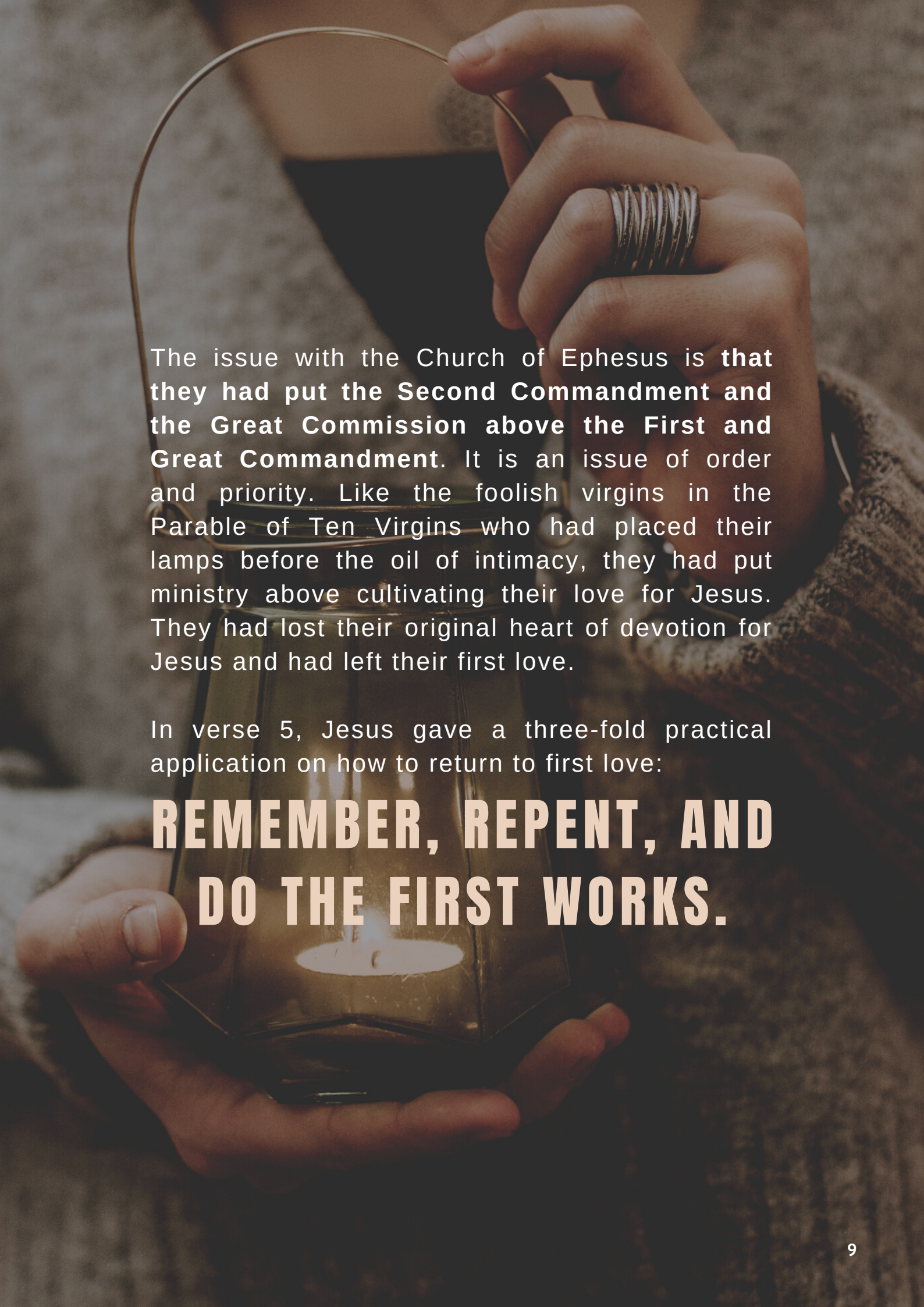


Satan wants to distract the Church, **so as to cause us to lose our first love for Jesus (2 Cor. 11:2-3)**. If we do not guard our devotion and our walk with Jesus, our light will eventually go out!

The issue about the loss of our first love is that the process is usually gradual and subtle. We drift slowly from our first love. Over time we become less engaged in conversation with the Lord and our hearts become less and less connected with Him. It happens over months or years and by the time we realize it, it might be too late!

Know this: **Our love for Jesus will not automatically grow or increase; we have to intentionally cultivate it. But our love for Jesus will automatically diminish if we do not watch and guard our hearts.**

Hence the **call for us to return to first love** and the **call for us to jealously guard our heart of love and devotion unto Jesus.**

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a small, lit lantern. The lantern is made of a dark, possibly metal or wood, material with a glass window showing a small flame. The person's right hand is at the top, holding the handle, and wears a silver-colored ring with multiple thin bands. The left hand is at the bottom, supporting the lantern. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric.

The issue with the Church of Ephesus is **that they had put the Second Commandment and the Great Commission above the First and Great Commandment.** It is an issue of order and priority. Like the foolish virgins in the Parable of Ten Virgins who had placed their lamps before the oil of intimacy, they had put ministry above cultivating their love for Jesus. They had lost their original heart of devotion for Jesus and had left their first love.

In verse 5, Jesus gave a three-fold practical application on how to return to first love:

**REMEMBER, REPENT, AND
DO THE FIRST WORKS.**



WHAT DOES "REMEMBER" MEAN?

Firstly, we must remember how much the Lord loves us. We must confess with our mouth this truth unto our hearts so that we will not buy into the narrative of the evil one.

Secondly, we want to remember how we used to love Jesus and spend time with Him. **We want to recall the joy of our abandonment and the freshness of our love when we first received God's call to extravagant devotion.**

We should also constantly evaluate ourselves in terms of first love. Ask ourselves questions like,

"Am I more or less excited about Jesus than one year ago?"

"Is my heart still tender towards Jesus?"

"Does my heart move when I read the Word of God or when I pray? Or am I just 'doing things' with a disconnected heart?"



2

WHAT DOES REPENTANCE INVOLVE?

True repentance is more than saying sorry, but it involves a change and an action. We have to realign our life vision, priorities and lifestyle choices so that we live out loving Jesus as the primary dream of our heart.

***Do you realize that by calling
the Church of Ephesus to
repent, Jesus is putting
not loving God in the
category of sin?***

If this is how seriously Jesus takes it, we have to take it seriously too.



3

WHAT ARE THE FIRST WORKS?

The first works are things that will help us to cultivate a heart of love and devotion for Jesus. We need to engage our hearts with Jesus and do the things that will cause the fire of love to burn in our hearts. The first works are first priority to the Lord. It is the one thing that is needed, and we have to be the ones who choose the good part (Lk. 10:38–42).

A person is running away from the camera down a long, straight asphalt road that stretches towards a range of rugged, snow-capped mountains under a clear blue sky. The road has a yellow dashed line down the center. The surrounding landscape includes dry grass and some evergreen trees.

In His final exhortation to the Church of Ephesus, Paul said,

“GRACE BE WITH ALL THOSE WHO LOVE OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST IN SINCERITY. AMEN.” (EPH. 6:24)

Paul is reminding us that grace will be multiplied to us if we set our hearts to love Jesus well and to guard our first love for Him.

WILL WE TAKE HEED AND DO SO?



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