

The Cooling Church: Ephesus

"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 2 'I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. 4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. 6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.'"

As we speak, some record-breaking cold weather is blowing through the United States. In Erin's home town, the maximum temperature today is expected to be -24, with a low of -34C. With the wind chill, it is expected to reach -48C. In those temperatures, there is a window of time you have before frostbite will set in.

Having been out once when it was -28C, I can tell you that cold such as that actually hurts. It's painful. It makes your joints feel slow and stiff. It causes your skin to feel numb. And I think it's interesting that in human language, we have compared certain states of the heart to the whole matter of temperature. When someone's love is no longer what it was, we speak of it having cooled. We might say so-and-so has become cold towards me. Jesus Himself predicts that in the last days, the love of many will wax cold. Conversely, love is often described in terms like fire, heat.

Why use temperature to depict the state of our love? I think because our experience of love and desire feels just like that. When desire wanes, it feels like a temperature drop, and the same stiffness, numbness, and general lack of movement we have in our bodies during physical cold is much how our hearts are when they no longer love like they did.

We know this happens in friendships, it happens in marriages. Sadly, it happens to Christians and whole churches in their walk with the Lord. We're going to study one such church today. In fact, we're going to study each of these churches over the next few weeks. These are precious documents, because they represent the only letters that Jesus wrote. Each of these letters was a letter dictated to John by the risen Lord Jesus Himself and when the Lord Jesus writes letters to churches, we should sit up and pay attention. These letters show what Christ expects in a church.

These seven churches were actual churches in the province of Asia Minor, the area we now know as Turkey. There were many other churches, but the Lord chose to address these seven. They were strategically chosen because they form a semi-circle along Asia Minor, meaning the messages could be read by all the churches if a messenger travelled in a simple semi-circle. . There were many other churches, but these were selected because their problems, successes and counsel would form timeless counsel for churches of all times.

Each church represents actual churches, with actual historical situations. They also represent conditions, problems and situations that are timeless and true of all churches of all times. In some ways, each of the seven represents something in every church, and by further application, something in every believer.

They probably represent general periods in church history, from its beginning to the return of the Lord. That may be so, but I think our primary focus needs to be on how each letter applies to each of us.

The letters follow a similar pattern each time. Each church is given a commendation/ approval, some a condemnation/ accusation/ ailment, counsel/ admonition, caution/ admonition, and challenge/ admonition (promises). Each letter is addressed to the angel of that church, which is to say, its messenger, or pastor. Very importantly, in each case, the Lord identifies Himself using a particular title, taken from the revelation of Himself in chapter 1. And usually, that aspect of His person is the solution to the church's problem. The Lord Himself is the remedy. His counsel is not to be ignored, for He knows perfectly the problem and the solution. Christ knows the state of every church perfectly.

We begin with **Ephesus**, which we could title the Cooling Church.

Had you lived in Ephesus at the time that this letter arrived, you would have lived in a thriving harbour city of around 225 000 people. It was, in fact, the capital city of the province, and a real centre of trade and commerce - not unlike Johannesburg, without the harbour.

It was also the very centre of the worship of Diana, with the temple to her honour there, as well as a thriving trade in Diana worship. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, 140 meters long, 70 metres wide, 20 metres (or seven storeys) high. It had huge folding doors, with 127 marble pillars, some covered in gold. The worship there was immoral and perverse, but it was certainly popular.

The church of Ephesus had been started by Paul on his third missionary journey. The apostle John lived in Ephesus before and after his exile. The church would have had to have a hard time opposing such powerful idol worship in its city. Archaeologists have found this inscription by early Christians: "Destroying the delusive image of the demon Artemis, Demeas has erected this symbol of Truth, the God that drives away idols, and the Cross of priests, deathless and victorious sign of Christ."

But this church had the privilege not only of having received a letter from Paul, not only having probably been the first to read John's epistles, but now they received a letter from the Lord Jesus Christ. Like the other seven churches, there was a commendation, a condemnation, some counsel and caution, and a challenge. While this church was unique, and while it seems to represent the apostolic era of the church, it can look very much like any church today, including our own.

I. The Commendation

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

The Lord begins by commending this church. He affirms them, and tells them that He has seen and noticed and appreciates the good they have done. We should see the wisdom of praising before we criticise, of affirming before we point out the failures.

Here the Lord lists several things about this Ephesian church to be commended.

First, their **diligence**. The Lord says, *I know your works, your labour, your patience*. This was a labouring church. They laboured, and the word in the original suggests heavy toil, work to the point of exhaustion. They served God, whether it was in teaching, or giving, or exhorting, or administering, or serving, or evangelising, or showing mercy, or being involved in somehow building the church; this was a hard-working church. They were not Christians who complained of burnout after a few weeks involvement. They did not cry time-out when ministry invaded their family time, or their leave time, or their off-days. They did not drop the ball if ministry involved some late nights, or some exhausted bodies and minds. These people were like those who worked with Nehemiah: they had a mind to work. The Lord repeats this in verse 3: *and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary*. They stuck with their hard work; they endured. And when it got tiring, they did not fade out. Very importantly, they laboured for the sake of Christ.

Second, their discernment. The Lord says, *"You cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars."* This was a discerning church. They knew how to judge, and to judge rightly. They could judge between good and evil, between true and false, between beautiful and ugly. They were not afraid to lose friendships, lose popularity, lose people in taking a stand. They actually tested and examined people claiming to be apostles. They did the hard work of examining the teachings of people next to Scripture, they examined their lives for fruit. This was a church interested not only in unity, but in purity. They wanted pure doctrine, authentic apostles, genuinely holy living. They weren't a church drowning in sentimentalism, worshipping their own tolerance, loving themselves for being so loving. They did the hard thing, and in a city devoted to idol worship, they drew a line in the sand. They made clear boundaries for the faith: true and false, Christian and non-Christian.

We read a few verses later: *But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. We don't know exactly who the Nicolaitans were. Some say it was an early movement to create a division between clergy and laity. I think our best guess comes in chapter 2:14-15. Here they seem to be compared to the evils of Balaam. Balaam, while not cursing Israel outwardly, taught the enemies of Israel how to tempt Israel to sin and harm itself. Perhaps this group claimed to be Christians and sowed seeds of compromise, immorality, and idolatry within the church. Whoever they were, the Ephesians sniffed them out and hated their doctrine. A discerning church that was quick to spot error in doctrine or in practice.

Perhaps back then, discerning churches were in the minority. Today, nothing will make you more unpopular than exposing error, calling people false teachers, describing some teachings as heresy. You won't be friended on Face book, invited to big conferences, or remain on many people's Christmas card list if you call sin, sin; expect the fruit of holy living in those who profess Christ, and practise church discipline on the persistently unrepentant. If you refuse to bear with those that are evil you'll be called graceless and heavy-handed.

But the Lord commends them. It is hard- going to be both a diligent and discerning church. You will be counter-culture; you will probably be unpopular, and you may incur a good deal of criticism. It's perhaps that very fact, that you have to adopt such a counter-culture stance that opens a church like this up to its greatest danger.

The danger for a diligent and discerning church was the trap that they had already fallen into.

II. The Condemnation

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

It is not a long condemnation, not a list of indictments. It is pointed, and painful: You have left your first love.

Now had this been written in an age of sentimentalism, it might have read, “you have lost your first love.” We have song-writers today who sing of how they have lost that loving feeling, as if love is like the taste in chewing gum, that you slowly lose; you can't really tell when, or how, but it just goes.

But Jesus did not say that they had *lost* their first love; He says they have *left* their first love. The word in the original language means to forsake, to abandon, to depart. It stresses an act that one is aware of, for which you are responsible. Love doesn't leave you, like fading sunshine on a cold day. You leave it.

In other words, this was a church that had much diligence, much discernment, but they had left desire. Desire: for this is at the heart of love. To desire God is to both depend on him, and delight in Him. You desire Him because you need Him, and you desire Him because He is beautiful and satisfying. You long for Him, and so you keep turning your whole being towards Him, longing to know Him more, rest on Him more, enjoy Him more.

Desire, as this passage shows us, can be absent from duty. Desire can be absent from discernment. Desire can be absent from diligence. It is possible to be hardworking, disciplined, discerning, but steadily forsake a life of seeking God for His own sake. It is possible to work for the Lord without worshipping the Lord. It is possible to serve the Lord without savouring the Lord. It is possible to be active for God and not to adore God.

How does this happen? At first, it may happen through simple neglect. Taking for granted what we once marvelled at, taking for granted what we once were amazed by; this slowly leads us to take for granted those means of communion with God: prayer, reading the Word, loving God's church, loving our neighbours with the Gospel. If we do not listen to the Holy Spirit's call to come back and renew our communion with Him, a coldness sets it.

And do you know what cold hearts do when they do not want to go back to God, but know they should? They find substitutes and some of the easiest substitutes for a life of desiring God is continual acts of service, and continual acts of discernment. You find the man who can tell you the name of every false teacher who parades on TBN, and can take you to book after book, website after website to point out his errors, but examine that man's prayer life, and it is dead. You find the man who has made a particular teaching his pet subject: a disputed doctrine, an area where there is debate, and he collects every book you can find on it, but his heart is stone cold to singing hymns to Christ. You find the woman who has made it her life's goal to be a diligent Doris, and she will serve on every committee and meet every need and exhaust herself, but ask her about her devotions, and she has to admit they seldom happen anymore. You find the long-time member who is in a position of leadership in church, and because he is busy organising, or administrating, or leading, or teaching, he feels it makes up for the silence in his soul between him and God.

Diligence is good. We need more diligent Christians. Discernment is crucial. There can be no love for God without it. But when they become ends in themselves, when they become substitutes for desiring God, they no longer count. Jesus does not say that their diligence and their discernment is good enough, and now they just need to add desire. No, he regards the whole thing as needing repentance.

I find this amazing. Back in verse 3, Jesus explicitly says that they had laboured for His name's sake. But you can be doing what you do for Christ, and still have a stone cold heart, no desire. Wasn't Martha clanging and banging in the kitchen for the sake of Jesus? And yet, Jesus says that Mary chose the better part: to commune with Christ. Yes, someone needed to be in the kitchen at some point but diligence without desire is cold. Like Paul says, the greatest possible sacrifices, done without love, come to nothing.

I take the word “first” here to mean first in priority, not first in time. Yes, we do need to think about the love we once had, but God does not call us to live in a state of honeymoon at all times. Instead, I think this is a call to place God as our first love. He is to be ultimate in our loves. All the other things we love are to be loved as means to the final end: God Himself. All the people, all the projects, all the pleasures in my life are to be loved as means of my first and ultimate love - God.

Every desire you have must other be consecrated to the one great desire, or confessed, if it cannot be. For the Ephesians, their diligence, and their discernment had replaced their first love.

Do you know why that's easy to do? Because nothing is more uncomfortable to our souls than coming to God just as we are to commune. Once we humble ourselves and come by grace, we love it and wish we had come earlier, and wish we could stay longer. But before we get there, our flesh will find a thousand things to do instead of turning to face God. It just so happens that diligent ministry, and discernment are really handy; they feel spiritual; they seem connected to God, but they can still be one or more steps short of actually desiring God for God.

III. The Caution and Counsel

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

The Lord tells them what they need to do: they need to remember, they need to repent, and they need to re-do. He tells them to remember from where they have fallen. Every Christian can remember when desire was what led him to church, to the Scriptures, to prayer, to witnessing, to obeying, to serving. He remembers when he did not do the works to feel accepted by God; He did the works because He knew He was accepted by God. He walked with God as one accepted in the Beloved Son, and enjoyed working as worship, discerning as a delight.

Jesus says, remember where you used to be, before the coldness, the hardness, the cynicism, the scepticism, the suspiciousness, the fear and the guilt set in. Remember when grace was a word often on your heart, and you kept returning to God like a bird to its perch. Remember when the Gospel of God's love for you led you to a life of love for Him.

Sometimes we need a trip down memory lane and painful though it may be to see where we are, it is better than pretending that we are where we ought to be. It's bittersweet to remember how happy you

once were. But it's the first way or getting out of this pattern.

The Lord says, repent. Quite simply, turn around. Change your mind and heart about this whole thing. Stop making excuses for your coldness; stop using service and discernment as substitutes. Admit that you have been like Adam: hiding in the trees, afraid to walk with God. Come back, like the prodigal son, because you will find that your Father is not in His throne room sulking, but standing on the porch, expecting your return, and ready to reward it with a feast.

Jesus says, re-do the first works. What are the first works? Well, the Ephesians needed no help in diligence and hard work. I doubt there was a kind of work in the church they did not do. I think first works goes with first love. Do your works with God as the motive. Do the works for the sake of desiring God all the more. And certainly, if you have been neglecting works such as communing with God in prayer, reading the Word, fellowshiping with believers, then renew those works.

What it comes down to is refusing to accept the distance between you and God, refusing to accept diligent service and discernment as enough.

The way Christ describes Himself here is part of this answer: *‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:*

The seven stars seems to represent the seven pastors of these churches, while the lampstands are the churches themselves. And see the intimacy here: the leaders of the church are held by Christ in His right hand, a place of favour, protection, honour. He protects them, and provides them to the churches. This is loving, intimate. And then where is He in relation to these churches? He is in the middle of them, walking in them. He is not distant, but present, desiring to commune. He does not need us, but He desires that we would desire Him. Christ is actively amongst us, but desires more than just diligent work and discernment. He desires our desire.

Christ gives a caution. It is this serious: if the church at Ephesus does not repent, Christ will come and remove the candlestick. Since each of the churches represent one candlestick in Christ's candelabra, that's another way of saying, if you do not do this, I will remove your church. I will put out your witness, and replace you. And when we look back in church history, the church at Ephesus lasted until about the year 450

IV. The Challenge:

7“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

In each of these letters, Jesus ends with a challenge to the ones that overcome. Who are these? Are they super-saints? Are they a special group? I believe the overcomers are simply a reference to true believers. Back in another book, also written by John, he wrote: *“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – even our faith” (1 John 5:4)*

So while this is a challenge to persevere, and to strive, it is also a promise to every believer saved by grace. He holds out one of the sweet promises to a believer as part of the motivation to endure, persevere and carry on. This is how God counsels. He affirms what is good, He tells you what is wrong,

He tells you how to put it right, and then He encourages you with promises. In this case, for those who repent of cold duty, and redo the first works of desire; these true believers will eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. That tree of life, which our first parents last ate of over 6000 years ago, which was denied them and guarded by a cherub with a flaming sword, that same tree will now be freely available. What does it represent? Abundant, immortal life.

Life is precious, and one of the deep sorrows is to sense our very lives weakening, slipping away, running out. You who have trusted Christ do not fear death, but that does not take away the fact that you love life. Do not fear - Jesus has promised life in a strength and fullness you have never known. Life that will not fade, wear out, or diminish. You will enjoy God and His new Heaven and New Earth for thousands upon thousands of years. He will be your first love without the presence of sin. And when you have enjoyed God in greater degrees with every year that passes for ten thousand years, you'll have no less years to sing His praise than when you'd first begun.

That place will know no winter. No soul-chilling coldness of body or heart. So then begin the springtime of your soul today by hearing what the Spirit has said to the church. Remember when desire for God controlled you. Repent of cold substitutes. Redo a life of desiring God. Then be diligent. Be discerning. Do all those things, as part of a heart that burns for God.