
Guard Your Affection For Christ!

By David Wilkerson

November 3, 1997 In the first three chapters of Revelation, the apostle John has an amazing vision: He sees Jesus walking in the midst of the seven New Testament churches of Asia. Christ's eyes are aflame, and he's wearing priestly clothes. It is clear he has come to judge these churches in righteousness.

Peter writes, "...judgment must begin at the house of God..." (1 Peter 4:17). And now, as Jesus appears among the seven churches, he begins to judge them according to both the good and bad he beholds. These judgments appear in Revelation 2 and 3 - both red-letter chapters, meaning every word comes directly from Jesus' lips.

Now, these seven churches were actual congregations, in real localities - the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Laodicea, and so on. Yet John hears God's voice speaking not only to these particular churches, but to the church universal - indeed, to every believer who looks for Jesus' soon return.

Jesus begins his judgments by listing the many good things about the churches that bless him and he compliments each church on these things. But he also sees several things that grieve him deeply - and he issues a warning to each church.

His first message is to the Christians at Ephesus - a church founded on the godly teaching of the apostle Paul. Jesus' judgment of the Ephesians is, "... thou hast left thy first love" (Revelation 2:4).

When Jesus uses the words "first love" here, he isn't speaking of the immature love we experience when we're first saved. Rather, he's talking about exclusive love. He's saying, "I once occupied first place in your heart. But now you've lost the exclusivity of your love for me. You've allowed other things to take my place!"

It is significant that of all the sins Jesus points out in these seven churches - adultery, covetousness, lukewarmness, false teachings, Jezebels in authority, dead worship, spiritual blindness - the first sin he names is the one that grieves him most: a loss of affection for him. Our God is a jealous lover - and he won't allow anything to come before our love for him!

I Believe of All the Seven Churches, the Christians at Ephesus Wounded Christ The Most!

David writes, "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9). I identify with David's words. The people in my life who are able to wound me most easily are those who love me the most. My halfhearted friends can't truly hurt me, nor can my enemies. But those who claim to be closest to my heart can wound me deeply.

Now, these Christians at Ephesus had walked closely with the Lord. As I read through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I'm amazed at the gospel these people heard and lived. In fact, Paul compliments them at length. He addresses them as "...the faithful in Christ Jesus...blessed...with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ...chosen...before the foundation of the world...predestinated...unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Ephesians 1:1-5).

Paul adds that they are a forgiven people, having the revelation of the mystery of Christ and being "...sealed with that holy Spirit of promise" (verse 13). He further prays they would have "...the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know...the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe..." (verses 17-19).

These Christians had been made alive, "...quickened...with Christ... (who) hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (2:5-6) Paul calls them Christ's "...workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works...(and) are made nigh [near] by the blood of Christ" (verse 13). He says that by God's grace, they are "...grow(ing) unto an holy temple in the Lord...through the Spirit" (verses 21-22).

What a description of a blessed, holy people! And now, in the book of Revelation, Jesus also compliments the Ephesian Christians. He tells them, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience..." (Revelation 2:2). In other words: "I know all the good things going on in your lives. You patiently labor for me without complaining. And you'll do anything for others. You're diligent in your good works - and that is very commendable!"

Jesus continues to compliment them, pointing out "...how thou canst not bear them which are evil..." (same verse). He's saying, in essence, "You hate sin with a passion! You don't tolerate it - in your life, your home or your church. You have good moral standards. And that also is commendable!"

"...thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars" (same verse). Jesus is saying, "You're rooted and grounded in sound teaching. And so you haven't been tossed about by all the latest teachings of the flesh. You're able to rightly judge false teachers and false prophets. And you expose them as liars, for the benefit of everyone among you. I commend you for this as well!"

"...thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (verse 6). In other words: "You reject antinomianism - the doctrine that says simply having faith allows man to do as he pleases. Indeed, you hate all doctrines of easy believism that say God overlooks the deeds of the flesh. You faithfully stand up against unholy lifestyles, and you cling to righteousness. This also is highly commendable!"

It quickly becomes evident in this passage that the Ephesians are not just a bunch of novices or lukewarm saints. No, Jesus is examining the hearts of a people who are well-grounded in the truth of the gospel - and who work to prove it in their lives, by sacrificing, laboring and standing up for truth.

Yet Jesus points out something else in the hearts of these Ephesians as well - something he notes is deeply wrong. He says, "I see all your works - your hatred for sin, your love for truth, your righteous courage. And yet somehow in all your labors, you've allowed your first love to wither. Your affection for me is dying!"

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (verse 4). Beloved, I have read and reread this verse - and I have concluded its seriousness cannot be overlooked. The word "somewhat" here - indicating something that might be taken lightly - does not appear in the original Greek text. Instead, the original phrase is translated, literally, "I have something against you!"

Now, I would like to think I'm an Ephesian-type Christian, someone who's a faithful laborer. I want to believe that my suffering is for Jesus' sake, that my good works glorify him, that I practice righteous

living, that I'm seated with him in heavenly places.

But when I read of Jesus walking among such well-taught believers as the Ephesians and telling them, "I have something against you" - it grips my soul! I have to ask my Lord: "Jesus, do you have something against me? Have I also lost my affection for you?"

Christ's Warning Isn't Just For Christians of a Bygone Era - But for Us Today!

I believe this warning to the Ephesians is intended for me personally - as well as for every Christian living in these last days! Simply put, the Lord is telling us, "It's not enough for you to be a caring, giving, diligent servant who grieves over sin and preaches truth. It's not enough for you to uphold moral standards, endure suffering for my sake, or even be burned at the stake for your faith. This is all part of taking up my cross.

"You can do all these things in my name. But if in the process of doing them your affection for me does not increase - if I am not becoming more and more the one great delight of your heart - then you have left your first love! If your affection for me is no longer a matter of great concern to you, then I have something against you!"

Consider David's words: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee" (Psalm 73:25). These are strong words - yet David isn't saying, "I don't have human love." He knows God has blessed human love. Rather, David is saying, "There is no one I love exclusively in my heart as I love my Lord. I desire him above all others!"

David also writes, "O God... my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is" (63:1). "As the hart [deer] panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God..." (42:1-2).

David says, "I thirst deeply for the Lord, the way a deer thirsts after it has been chased. A deer will go past the point of exhaustion to find the water it seeks!"

Likewise, Jesus is telling the Ephesian Christians, "You no longer seek me as the deer does. I'm no longer the chief object of your desire. You may be willing to do things for me - but I'm not at the center of your heart anymore!"

Christians Have Lightly Skimmed Over This Passage In Revelation for Years!

Some believers might respond, "What's so serious about this matter? Maybe I'm not as intense for the Lord as I was when I was younger. And maybe I've slacked off in my affection for him. But, so what? Jesus knows I still love him."

No! Jesus takes any lack of affection very seriously. Indeed, he says such a lack constitutes a fall: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent..." (Revelation 2:5).

You might answer, "I can understand how an act of adultery is a fall. And I can see how falling back

into drugs or alcohol is a fall. But how can losing an intense love for Christ really be a fall?"

When Jesus warns, "... repent, and do the first works..." (same verse), he's saying: "Think back to what you were like when I first saved you. You rejoiced that I came to live in your heart! You couldn't wait for church on Sunday, just to tell people how much you loved me. And you spent all your free time digging into my word, learning about my love for you. You never considered prayer a burden, because I meant everything to you. You loved me more than life itself.

"But now you've fallen away from all that. I get so little of your time now, so little of your attention. You've grown cold toward me. Something else has your heart!"

Jesus attaches a serious warning to this verse: "...repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (same verse). For many years theologians have tried to soften this warning, wanting it to mean something different. But it can't be softened! It means exactly what it says. Jesus is saying to us:

"If you claim to have the fire of God, and yet I am no longer the delight of your heart - I will take away every bit of light you have! No matter what good works you do for me, you will no longer be my witness. I simply won't recognize anything you do - because you've lost your love for me!"

There are several signs and evidences of a dying love for Christ. I want to list three of these for you. I believe you can measure your love for Jesus by examining these three things:

1. Your Love for Christ Is Dying If You Spend More Time on the Things of This World and Less Time in His Presence!

What holds your heart right now? Does your soul yearn for Jesus, or for the things of this world?

Not long ago, I received a distressing letter from a woman on our mailing list. She wrote: "My husband was once on fire for God. For years he gave himself faithfully to the Lord's work. But today he's all wrapped up in his new pursuit - horses! He bought several, and he has become absolutely consumed with them. Now, instead of getting into God's word, he spends all his free time reading about breeding horses. He no longer has any time for the Lord, or for me. I worry for him, because he's grown so cold!"

Of course, there is nothing wrong at all with owning horses or having an interest in them. But Jesus told a parable about this very kind of legitimate pursuit. A wealthy man sent his servant to invite all his friends to a great feast he was holding. But, scripture says, the man's friends "... all with one consent began to make excuse..." (Luke 14:18).

One friend told the servant, "I just bought a piece of land sight unseen, and I have to inspect it. Please tell your master I won't be able to come." The next friend told the servant, "I just bought a yoke of oxen, and I haven't had time to test them. Tell your master I can't come, because I have to go into the field to plow with them." Yet another friend told the servant, "I just got married, and I'm about to take my honeymoon. I don't have time to come to the feast."

This man had invited all his friends to enjoy an intimate time of fellowship with him. And he had made

all the arrangements for their comfort and convenience. The table had been set, and everything had been prepared. But no one came. Everyone was simply too busy or preoccupied.

Yet each person had a good, legitimate reason for not coming. After all, they weren't avoiding their friend so they could go partying or bar-hopping. On the contrary, the Bible commends everything these people were doing: Buying and selling can provide security for one's family. And testing a major purchase is a sound business practice. Finally, marriage is a blessing that the scriptures encourage.

Yet, how did this wealthy man react? Scripture says, "The lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, that none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper" (verses 23-24).

Jesus is making a very clear point in this parable: Each of these good, legitimate things becomes sinful when it takes priority over the Lord!

Let me give you an example. A favorite after-church activity for many Christians is to go to a restaurant with friends. They're able to sit and talk for hours about the things of God over a sandwich or a cup of coffee. And once they exit the restaurant, they spend another half hour talking in the parking lot before parting. It's a time of wonderful fellowship for everyone. Yet, when asked, many of these same Christians claim they have no time to seek the Lord!

During my early years in ministry, I had several godly friends whom I admired for their devoted prayer lives. They spent hours on their faces in God's presence - and their sermons showed it. They preached with fire, unction, life!

Some of these men later went to seminary, seeking a deeper knowledge of the Bible. They dug deep into Hebrew and Greek studies, trying to know the scriptures better. And their studies demanded they read many outside texts.

In the end, however, many of these men lost their fire for Jesus. Why? They spent so much time reading legitimate things - literature, commentaries, textbooks - they neglected to study God's word for themselves. Their pursuit of knowledge robbed them of their affection for Christ!

Any "good" or "legitimate" thing becomes sinful when it takes priority over the Lord!

2. You Can Measure Your Love for Christ by How Deeply You're Affected by Anything That Robs You of Quality Time Alone With Him.

If you can go about your daily life facing all kinds of interruptions and demands, and yet not spend ten minutes in God's presence - your love is dying!

Think about it: If you love someone exclusively above all others, you'll make that person feel he's the most important being on earth. Everything else will pale in comparison to him.

Isn't this how you first loved your spouse, when you were courting? If she called on the phone while you were busy doing something, you dropped everything just to talk to her. And if anyone intruded on your time alone together, you resented it! Your one desire was to develop the love between you.

Everything else took second place.

Yet many Christians today go for weeks, even months, without spending quality time with Jesus. He stays on the backburner at all times. They may testify, "I love Jesus with all my heart" - but how can this be true, when they neglect him for days on end?

In Song of Solomon, the bride could not sleep because her beloved "... had withdrawn himself..." (Song of Solomon 5:6). This woman arose in the middle of the night, saying, "... my soul failed... I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer" (same verse). So she quickly ran into the streets, looking everywhere for her lover, and crying out, "Have you seen my beloved?"

Why was this such a serious matter to her? It was because, she said, "... This is my beloved, and this is my friend..." (verse 16). "... I am sick of love [faint with desire for him]" (verse 8). She couldn't be without her beloved!

I know a couple who are having serious marital problems. The husband told me, "My wife has never made me feel I'm important to her. I take second place to everyone else in her life!"

This man has to travel a great deal in his work. Once, when he called his wife from the road, she told him she was planning a romantic dinner for his return. It would be just the two of them, a time of romance and intimacy. For days the husband looked forward to that special evening. And finally, when he walked through the front door, it was just as his wife had promised: She was wearing his favorite dress. And she had prepared his favorite meal.

Ten minutes into dinner, however, the phone rang. The man touched his wife's hand and said, "Let it ring. I've so looked forward to this time with you."

She replied, "No, it could be important," and quickly got up to answer the phone. He pleaded with her, "Please! Let's enjoy our time together just this once." She assured him, "I'll only be a minute."

Half an hour later, she came back and announced, "That was Mother. She's depressed, so I invited her over. She needs to be with people tonight."

This man felt completely cut out of his wife's life. There was always someone else, or some kind of interruption, that seemed more important to her than himself. He told me, "She spends hours talking with her friends or counseling people. Yet every time I ask her for quality time, she says she doesn't have any for me. This can't be love!"

I ask you - how does Jesus feel when he spreads the table, anxiously awaits our company, and yet we never show up? The Bible calls us his bride, his beloved, his one great love; it says we were created for fellowship with him. So, what kind of rejection must he feel when we continually put others before him?

3. Your Love for Christ Is Dying If You Have Given in to a Besetting Sin!

I'm not speaking here of Christians who still wage warfare with their sin - who are not yet free from it

and continue to hate it. Such believers faithfully cry out to God, believing the Holy Ghost to empower them to victory over their lustful habits.

No, I'm speaking instead to those who think they can continue being a witness for Christ while giving in to their bosom sin. They've given up the spiritual war with their lust - surrendering to it completely!

I received a sad letter from a pastor recently. His wife had watched as his relationships grew worse and his ministry failed. Finally, as she was cleaning one day, she found a stash of pornographic videos. She confronted her husband with them and threw them out.

But the man later sneaked out to the dumpster and retrieved the videos. He admitted he couldn't let go of them! Now he wrote to me, saying, "Brother Dave, please pray for me. I've left the ministry and am teaching school - but none of my fellow teachers respect me."

Why doesn't this man have any respect? It's because his candlestick has been removed! He couldn't be Christ's witness on the job - because the Lord was no longer with him. No matter how many tears he sheds or confessions he makes, he will remain among the living dead as long as he holds onto his sin.

Yet how different it was when a young man came to me, weeping and confessing, "Pastor Dave, I fell back into sin! I got high and nearly overdosed. But as I stood at the brink of hell, I saw how my sin hurt Jesus. I can't do this to him anymore!" As I prayed with him, he cried out in sorrow, "Lord, I'm so sorry for how I hurt you!"

That young man's candlestick will not be removed. His light will again shine! You see, Jesus promises in this same passage, "... repent, and do the first works... To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:5, 7). God promises paradise to all who repent!

Is your love for Jesus exclusive? Do you regularly take quality time to be with him? Or have other things crept into your heart, taking up your thoughts and affections?

Jesus is asking you right now to repent and start all over again. He wants you to stop and realize, "Wait a minute - I see how this thing has crept into my life. And it's robbing me of my exclusive love for Jesus! I can't let this go on any longer. I've got to go back to my affection for him. Lord, forgive me! Light my candle anew!"

Go back to your first love today. Ask him for grace and strength to begin again to guard your affection for Christ!