Session 1: Ephesus: Returning to Our First Love (Rev. 2:1-7)

THE SEVEN MESSAGES TO THE CHURCHES
Revelation 2:1–7: The church of Ephesus. Now again we are looking at the seven churches of Asia. They are all in Revelation 2–3. These seven messages are the Lord's last words of instruction to the church. After the day of Pentecost, about sixty years go by, and He comes back, and this is the final thing He wants the church to know before He returns 2,000 years later. So these are the elements of the messages which were not given by the Spirit to the apostles in books like Romans, Galatians, and the different letters the apostles wrote. These are the messages that Jesus wanted to personally impart and reveal in His zeal for the church.

THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS
Let's read Revelation 2:1–7: "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, says the Lord, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His hands.'" Of course that is the Lord Jesus, the One who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. Verse 2 (paraphrase): "I know your works, I know your labor, I know your patience." And the word could be perseverance. In other words, "I know that you stick with it. You do not quit. I know that you cannot bear those who are evil. You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not really apostles. You have found out by testing them that they are liars" (v. 2 paraphrase). He repeats in verse 3 (paraphrase): "You have persevered, you have this stick-with-it-ness, this perseverance, and you have patience; you have labored for My name's sake and you have not become weary. You have not given up." It sounds like the model church. If we met a church like this today, we would be so excited about it. I mean hardworking, pressing in and not giving up. Verse 4 (paraphrase): "However—or nevertheless—I have this against you: you have left your first love. You do not love Me like you used to." Verse 5 (paraphrase): "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works. So do the works you did when you were first converted. Or else I will come to you quickly and I will remove your lampstand from its place; I will do this unless you repent." Verse 6: "But this you have"—and now He is going to go back and compliment them again—". . . you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans." Then the Lord comments, "I hate them too. I hate these deeds and you hate them" (v. 6 paraphrase). We will find out in a few weeks that one of the churches tolerated them but the Ephesians hated these deeds. The Lord says, "I like this." Then He goes on in verse 7 and He says: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes"—now He gives the promise—"I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

INTRODUCTION TO EPHESUS
Here are a couple of quick introductory words concerning the church at Ephesus.

Paragraph A. Ephesus was the largest city in the Roman province of Asia Minor. It had 250,000 people who lived there. It was the third-largest city in the whole known world at that time. So in our day it would be like the New York City of the world. It was an economic center in being a

seaport and one of the primary seaports in the ancient world. Being a seaport, it was known for its immorality.

IDOL WORSHIP
Secondly, it was not only a financial center, it was a center for idol worship. It was one of the big religious centers of the ancient world. People would travel there for idol worship. The temple of Diana was one the famous temples and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world just in its size and splendor, according to the natural. Now this temple worship happened in all the seven churches. What they would do in the temple worship is they would combine their idolatry with immorality. They would involve orgies in the temple worship. It was really demonic, evil, and wicked. The silversmiths were very prosperous in the city of Ephesus, because they would make the little idols that the population would want. They would travel from other places to the city. They would buy one of the gold or silver or bronze idols, because people felt compelled to have a household idol, a household deity, a statue for their own house to bring blessing. So these silversmiths were making them. They were making so much money. It was one of the great industries of the city.

REVIVAL CENTER
Not only was it a financial center and a center for idol worship, it became one of the great revival centers of the ancient world. The church in the strategic city of Ephesus was a lampstand church, which means that God anointed this church to shine its light to the regions far outside the city. It is what you can refer to as a lampstand ministry. They are the ministries that do not just reach their city, but the Lord uses them to bring inspiration and impart truth to regions far beyond their local area. They were a lampstand city. They were one of the most powerful churches in the ancient world, or rather one of the most powerful churches in the book of Acts. Surpassed only by the church in Jerusalem for a while, and the church of Antioch. So Ephesus would have been the third most prominent church. Eventually it became the most powerful church for several decades. After that, Rome would have had that position towards the end of the first century.

IDOL WORSHIPERS BURN THEIR MAGIC BOOKS
Paragraph C. Paul returned on his third missionary journey (he went on three missionary journeys in the book of Acts) to establish this church. The greatest revival in the book of Acts broke out in this city. It was so powerful that Paul stayed there for three full years. He did not stay anywhere else for three full years, because he felt compelled to bring the gospel where it had never been named before. What happened was that the Word of God, it says in Acts 19, reached all of Asia from one city. Now that is the definition of a lampstand church. It is reaching a region, or even nationally and internationally.

Fervent worship of the goddess Diana was really important to society—meaning, even if you had a job, they mandated that you were involved in the temple worship. It became part of the social and economic requirements. To keep your job, you had to be involved in the different festivals and all that went along with it.

When Paul came, they had so many new converts that they renounced their devotion to their idols in that city. Of course all the cities had idols in them in the ancient world. I mean, it was an idol-worshiping center and they renounced it. They were so devoted to Jesus in their early days that they burned all of their magic books, all the books that were related to their devotion to the false goddess Diana. It says in Acts 19 that it was 50,000 silver coins' worth of book burning. In the book of Acts, they were so devoted, and I do not know that anybody made them do this. They said, "Jesus, we love You so much; we are going to break every tie with yesterday's error in our life." We need some book burnings today. We need to throw some other things in besides just books. It would have been about a five million-dollar book burning in today's world, because a silver coin was about a day's wages. You get an idea of the fervency of what is going on in the city of Ephesus.

JESUS REVEALS HIMSELF

Jesus stands in front of John and He reveals Himself in two different ways: as the One who holds the seven stars and the One who walks in the midst of the candlesticks.

Paragraph A. In each of the descriptions that Jesus gives, He introduces Himself to each of the seven churches, and He applies some of the characteristics from the vision He gave John in Revelation 1. In Revelation 1, He revealed Himself in His glory, and then in chapters 2–3, when He addressed each of the seven churches, to each one of them He applied one or two of the features of His glory from chapter 1. This would have a specific application to the challenge He was going to give that church, or to the promise He was going to give that church. And to *this* church He reveals Himself as the One who holds the seven stars and walks in the midst of the candlesticks.

THE SEVEN STARS ARE SEVEN MESSENGERS

In Revelation 1:20, Jesus lets John know that the seven stars are symbolic of the seven angels. It says it clearly. We interpret the book of Revelation in a straightforward way, unless the book of Revelation indicates something symbolic. Some folks assume the whole book is symbolic and just give up on it. The book of Revelation is to be read in its plain sense, a straightforward interpretation, unless it says in the text that it is symbolic. This is one of those situations, Revelation 1:20, where the Lord tells him that the seven stars are seven angels.

The word "angels" in the New Testament means "messengers." It can be an angelic messenger or a human messenger. It just says "messenger." It just leaves it up to the interpreter. I am convinced it means a human messenger, not an angelic one. Jesus did not give the message to an angel and tell John to write an angel a letter and just hope the angel brought it to him. What he did was this: John wrote this letter to the human messenger, the senior apostolic leader for each one of these churches, and the leader was the one who was responsible to implement the instructions and then encourage them with the promises that Jesus gave each of these seven churches.

THE SEVEN LAMPSTANDS SPEAK OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES
It goes on in Revelation 1:20 to tell us that the seven lampstands actually speak of the seven churches. Each one of these churches was a lampstand ministry. Each one of these churches was anointed by the Lord to bring light far beyond their immediate locale. They were raised up to inspire and to be a model for other ministries. There are many what I would call lampstand ministries across the earth today.

Paragraph B. Jesus said, "I want you to know that I am the One who holds the seven stars; I hold My leadership in My own hand" (Rev. 2:1, paraphrased). This is a statement of tenderness, because the church in Ephesus had the biggest revival in the history of the church up to that time.

We are about sixty years into the history of the church from the day of Pentecost in 30 AD. It is almost 90–100 AD right now when the book of Revelation is being revealed to John. He is in his nineties. The leaders of the church in Ephesus were the primary church in terms of power and size in the world at that time.

I HOLD YOU IN MY RIGHT HAND
I just think of something we can all relate to, any time the Lord gives you new responsibility—of course they had a huge one—just the natural inadequacies that we would feel when the Lord says, "I am going to give this to you and I want you to be responsible for it." On a scale of one to ten, if He gives you a one and it is new, it is overwhelming. If he gives you a two, it overwhelms you when it used to be a one. He continually enlarges that which He asks of us. He is telling the leaders—He says, "I want you to know that I am the One who holds you in My hand. With My right hand I will guide you. With My right hand I will sustain you" (v. 1, paraphrased).

Paragraph C. I give several passages from the book of Psalms, all from King David, where David really focused on the revelation of the right hand of God. This was really dear to David's heart. Read these passages. The one I really like is where David says, "Show Your marvelous kindness by Your right hand, O You who save those who trust in You; save me from those who rise up against me" (Psalm 17:7, paraphrased). In other words, "Your kindness is so marvelous. You will help me with your right hand. You will show me kindness and You will defeat my enemies." That is what being held in His right hand means.

The point is, as a leader in the Body of Christ—and many of you are leaders; even though your sphere might be small, you still have leadership. It may be three people who are following or watching your life for inspiration. That is an element of leadership, it really is. And some of you obviously have a lot more influence than that. But do not think that before you have a position on a church org chart, you are not in leadership. If people are following you, you are leading. One of the things that leaders naturally feel is, "Lord, I do not know if I am adequate." He says, "I will hold you. I will hold you with My own right hand."

I remember when we first started IHOP–KC. It was nine years ago. We were announcing it and I was thinking, "Lord, my goodness. Are you sure?" This is just the truth: "I will hold you. I will guide you. I will do My part in this" (Rev. 2:1, paraphrased). That is what this verse means.

I WILL WALK WITH YOU

Paragraph D. Not only does Jesus hold the leaders whom He calls, He walks in their midst, He walks with them. When it says that He walks in the midst of the candlesticks, the candlesticks are the churches. It says in Revelation 2:1 (paraphrased), "I will walk with you. I will not look the other way and forget." Sometimes we think that the Lord gets busy. We think, "Lord, do You realize I am over here and I am sinking in the boat?"

He says, "No, I will be in the boat with you. I will walk among you. I will be aware of what you do."

Some might say, "Oh no, I don't want You aware of everything."

The point here is that He says, "I am aware of your needs, I am aware of your frailty, I am aware of the attack, I am aware of the lack. I am walking hand in hand with you. Like I walked with Adam in the garden, I will walk with you in the midst of that which I have commanded you to do." This is a huge statement: "I will hold you and I will walk with you. Like I walked with Adam in the garden, I will fellowship with you. We will work together." He will even do this: He will hold us and walk us even through the issues He calls us to repent of.

He is really calling them to repent of one major issue, and He is saying, "I am not going to abandon you. I am going to be with you and help you repent and get through on this issue. I am going to hold you and walk side by side with you."

It is the saying that you have heard before: "I don't know the future, but I know the One who holds the future." The One who is holding the future is also holding you. This is a really important verse, because when the enemy comes and says, "You are in over your head and the Lord has forgotten you," you can say, "It is written: I worship the One who holds me and I worship the One who walks with me, even though I do not have a clue where this thing is going."

I love this passage in Deuteronomy 23, when the Lord spoke of walking in their midst. It says in verse 14: "For the Lord you God walks in the midst of your camp." I have no doubt this is what Jesus was referring to when He was talking to the church in Ephesus. It's as if He says, "I will deliver you, I will give your enemies over to you. You will defeat them. Therefore, because I am in the camp, be holy" (Deut. 23:14, paraphrased). In other words, "Because I am committed to that which I have entrusted to you, you must agree with Me in your life. You cannot live in darkness when I am the One working with you in this endeavor."

"See that no unclean thing is named among you. Turn it away from you" (Deut. 23:14, paraphrased). "If an unclean thing emerges, get rid of it."

EPHESUS: THE PREMIER CHURCH AT THAT TIME
The good thing about the church in Ephesus, I believe, is the principle Jesus is quoting. They turned away the false teachers and the wrong things. Their error is that they allowed their fervency of love to be neglected and to diminish, but they were turning away the bad stuff. They were really doing this, but they were lacking in one area, a huge area: the issue of their love.

They were the most powerful, influential church in the world at that time. That is why it was essential as a lampstand church. I would go further to say *it was* the premier lampstand church of that hour. (This is about 90 AD, or 95, when the book of Revelation was written. And the Jerusalem church was scattered in 70 AD, so the Jerusalem church has been scattered for twenty, twenty-five years). So the whole world, the Body of Christ, is looking to Ephesus: "Hey, do this thing right and encourage us." The Lord says, "I really want you to do this thing right because I want you to impart the right DNA, as I have entrusted you with great influence."

FAITHFULNESS AND PERSEVERANCE
Roman numeral III. Now He is going to give them affirmation for their faithfulness. The main word of affirmation was for their perseverance. The word that was used in the NKJV is the word "patience." Often in the New Testament, the word "patience" means "perseverance." It means not giving up when it is hard. Anybody can sign up for three months or even a year or two for something. It is sticking with it for decades. Do not give up. Do not give in. If you blow it, call it sin, repent, push delete, and go hard again. Start again today, hard. He says, "I know your works, I know your labor, I know your perseverance"—He really focuses in here— "You cannot bear these evil ministries, they so trouble you" (Rev. 2:2, paraphrased). Because there were false ministries all around the early church.

There are many today as well. Many of them are on TV. Just because they are well-known doesn't mean they are preaching the Word of God. Popularity is not the test which proves that what they are doing is in agreement with the Word of God.

FALSE MINISTRIES
He says, "You cannot bear it, it troubles you, it bothers you. I like it that it bothers you. You cannot bear it when these false ministries are in your midst" (Rev. 2:2, paraphrased).

As we look at all seven letters, you are going to find out that some of the other churches tolerated the false ministries, because these false ministries do not have horns. They do not come in with demonic horns and say, "I am false." The number one issue of a false ministry—not the only issue, but the number one issue—is that they turn the grace of God into licentiousness (Jude 4, paraphrased), which means they preach a liberty in grace that makes people comfortable to sin instead of repent and walk with God with all their heart. That is so prevalent in the body of Christ in our nation.

FALSE TEACHING ON GRACE
There is so much false teaching on grace. This is what the Nicolaitans did; this is what the doctrine of Balaam did and the teaching of Jezebel did. They told them that it was OK to sin in

the name of grace. That is the number-one issue they all had in common. Some of them would take on other issues as well, and there was a lot of doctrinal confusion, but that was the real in-your-face issue. They made the people comfortable sinning by teaching the doctrine of grace in a false way.

"It is okay to be involved in those orgies, because you are going to bring the gospel to those people anyway. It is just physical anyway, and it really does not matter what you do with your body. He does not care what you do with your body; He cares what you do with your spirit." That was what the Gnostics believed. Many cult groups were Gnostic. They claimed to have spiritual insight. They did not care what they did with their bodies as long as their spirits were right with God—so they said.

He says in Revelation 2:3 (paraphrased): "You have persevered, you have patience, you have labored for My name's sake, you are not weary." Verse 6 (paraphrased): "You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans." This is false teaching on grace. It is more than that, but this is the core issue.

Paragraph A. He says, "I know your works and your labor" (v. 3, paraphrased). They were a hard working church. They were by today's standard, a model, dedicated, fervent church in terms of their work ethic. They were the biggest, most influential church. Jesus was troubled by the lack of love they had for Him, though.

Paragraph D. He says, "I know . . . you cannot bear those who are evil" (v. 3). This is talking about the false ministries. These apostles he is going to mention in the next sentence would not tolerate the false ministries that promoted impurity. They had impurity in doctrine and impurity in morality. The impurity in morality—meaning, it was compromise.

It is always in the name of grace. That is what Jude said in verses 3–4. He talked about, "You have turned the grace of God into licentiousness" (v. 4, paraphrased)—compromise or fleshly indulgence. "You have turned the teaching of the grace of God into a doctrine that makes people comfortable sinning" (paraphrased). Jude said it really clearly. He summarized the whole thing.

EXPOSE FALSE MINISTRIES

It is right to expose false ministries. It is hard to do. There is a lot that is involved in it, but it is biblical to do that. I was just with a group of leaders, a whole bunch of leaders who have big ministries—about fifty of them. Some of them were saying, "In the name of love, we do this or that." In other words, we just overlook all sin. This was a verse that was emphasized. Several brought this verse up. They said, "Hey, what about this?" They were saying, "Maybe you are right. Maybe we are supposed to test and not bear with falsehood in ministry."
The falsehood is not mostly false doctrine about Jesus. Most people dot their i's and cross their t's: Jesus is God, Jesus is Man. Where they stumble is in the area of morality. In the ancient world, there was a lot of confusion about Jesus as well.

Paragraph E. "You test those who say they are apostles and they are not" (v. 2, paraphrased). Beloved, we are supposed to test them to see if their lifestyle and their doctrine measure up to the

Word of God. We are supposed to test them. In Matthew 7, in the Sermon on the Mount, He did not say that you do not judge—but you do not judge in a way that you are not willing to be judged yourself. Do not test somebody in a way you are not willing to be tested. We are to test it by the Word of God.

THE NICOLAITANS
Paragraph F. "The deeds of the Nicolaitans, they hated" (v. 6, paraphrased). There are two different views of what the Nicolaitans are. I believe that the first one I have on the notes is the right one. These two views are widespread. The Nicolaitans: most of the early church fathers from the second and third century, of whose writings we have records, attest that Nicolas was a teacher from the early church. Quite a few of them will go further—not just that it was Nicolas, a man, but it was one of the deacons from Acts 6. Some don't say that, but some of them do. He fell into error and his followers, a generation later, are perpetuating the errors that Nicolas taught.

It is Antinomianism. Antinomianism is a term you want to know, because you find it if you do any kind of Bible study from books or commentaries. Antinomianism means the teaching on the grace of God that reduces it to where you are forgiven, but you do not need to repent; repentance isn't important.

THE NECESSITY OF REPENTANCE
Beloved, we do not have the right to offer people forgiveness separated from repentance. When we sin, we repent and declare war on it. We may stumble in that sin within the hour again. We may do it again, but sooner or later we will back away from it. I mean in terms of our character—we will get victory over it, if we really declare war on it. It is not that we get victory first and then we get forgiveness. We get forgiveness when we declare war on it again, but we cannot offer people salvation without repentance.

The guy says, "You know, if you want to receive Jesus, repeat this prayer." I have seen people get saved that way because the people's hearts were so alive by the Holy Spirit. But we have to tell them that they have to say no to sin. We cannot offer a gospel different from the Word of God. We cannot offer unbelievers salvation without repentance, and we cannot assure believers that they can be right with God without repenting.

We cannot present a message of grace that violates that simple precept. This distortion of liberty in grace fills the Church today. It is true false teaching and it is all over the airwaves. The Christian bookstores are filled with teachers who minimize the need for repentance, and they are extolled as people who focus on the love of God. Here at IHOP–KC, we want to really focus in an extreme way on the love of God, but not at the expense of the necessity of repentance.

I HAVE THIS AGAINST YOU
Roman numeral IV. He says, "Nevertheless, I have this against you" (Rev. 2:4). And here is the correction. Each of the churches—well, five of the seven churches—were corrected. They had compromise.

"You have neglected your love. I have this against you" (v. 4, paraphrased). Jesus is not against them. He loves them so much that He is pointing it out. He wants to correct them, because He knows that their ministry cannot continue in the same brightness, and He knows that they will suffer loss when they stand before Him on the last day. He says, "I want to continue to anoint you, but if I am anointing you and you are influencing this mass number in a wrong way, then that means that I am anointing that which causes trouble to My kingdom. I am going to take the lampstand, this anointing of influence, away from you." That is in essence what the lampstand is. "You have left your first love. You are going to meet Me one day soon and you do not want this deficiency in your life when we stand face to face. I love you and I want you to love Me."

What they did is they put their labor into ministry. Again, they were the biggest church in the whole world at that time. The most powerful and the most influential and the largest. Undoubtedly they had the most money. In our day, they might have had the biggest buildings, the best this and the biggest that. Everybody ooh-ing and aah-ing (exclaiming in admiration). The Lord says, "No, no, this is not OK with Me."

LOVE FOR GOD MUST COME FIRST

The first commandment is to love the Lord our God. The Lord says, "This is the first commandment. This is the first on My heart." The reason that He wants us to love Him with all of our heart is because He loves us with all of His heart. He says, "I want you to love Me in the intensity of your capacity like I love you in the intensity of My capacity." His capacity is a lot bigger, but He wants us to love Him in our strength—all the strength that we have. We do not have that much. Our mind is not that big compared to His. Within the realm of our capacity, He wants us to be wholehearted. The good news is that when we love God with all of our heart, we will love people way better if we love God more deeply.

Some people think, "I love people, but I am not focused much on the first commandment."

I say, "That is the most illogical thing. It is like saying, 'I really like my kidneys, so I am just going to let my heart die.'"

Our love for people is so connected to the overflow of our love for God. It is impossible to maintain consistent love for people that does not come out of the overflow of our love for God. You do not have to pick your liver, heart, or kidney. You get all of them. We do not pick loving God or loving people. There is a natural sequence. It all flows together in God's heart, but it starts in the fountain of loving God. And that starts with the revelation that He loves us.

YOU HAVE LEFT YOUR FIRST LOVE

Paragraph D. He says, "You have left your first love" (Rev. 2:4). They neglected the original devotion they had in their early days. Remember the early-day revival in Acts 19, when they were so fervent for Jesus. They were burning books, breaking their connection to sin and wrong things in the past, and they were red-hot for Jesus. They did not care what it cost them. Now it is the second generation, because it is now forty years later. Some of the original members are still around, and the church is really big and rich compared to all the churches in the earth in that day.

Their influence was amazing in terms of the number of people who considered them as influential in their lives. But they had left their first love. They had neglected to cultivate love in their heart for Jesus.

It takes time to cultivate love for Jesus. You cannot do this on the run.

One guy talked to me some years ago, and he said, "Well, when I hear you talk, it is almost like you put a correlation between the time you take and the love you have."

I said, "Totally. I am really glad you are getting it."

He said, "You are kidding. I was saying that kind of as a correction to you." He was pointing it out—as if it seemed that I was saying that there was a correlation between the maturity of love they had and the time they spent with the Lord at His feet.

I said, "Of course there is a correlation."

He said, "I have never thought of that idea."

I said, "I cannot imagine not connecting those two realities."

Beloved, it takes time to cultivate love. You cannot cultivate deep love on the run. You have to stop and sit at His feet.

He said, "I have this against you" (v. 4), paragraph C. The Lord is not against them; He is against the error they are perpetuating. He is against it for their own good and for the good of the people they are going to influence. The people they are going to influence are going to believe in the error they are going to perpetuate and impart to them.

Roman numeral V. Here is the exhortation to respond. He says, "Remember from where you have fallen" (v. 5, paraphrased). He gives them three things: "Remember, repent, do"—or act—"or else I am going to take your lampstand; I am going to take away the anointing of influence from you" (Rev. 2:5, paraphrased). That is what their lampstand is in essence. It is the grace of God to bring light to the region far beyond their local area.

STOP AND REMEMBER

Paragraph A. Jesus gives a three-step process to restore our love for Him: remember, repent, and act. It's as if He says, "Remember how you used to feel about Me? Do you not remember the days when your heart was tender? Stop and remember. Take some time. Remember the level of dedication that you had for Me. How all your money was Mine and all your time was Mine. You thought nothing about dedicating yourself in these different areas of your life. Some years have gone by and now that seems burdensome to you. Remember where we were at one time. Think on how good I have been to you through the years. Think about what you deserve, but I have not

allowed to happen to your life. Think of the way you felt about Me a year ago, or ten years ago, whatever—remember!" (Rev. 2:5, paraphrased).

Remembering is important. A lot of people do not do the remembering part. I take time and look back at previous seasons when I was more dedicated in a particular area and it stirs me. Not every time, but it needs to. I say, "Lord, that is not good."

I can just imagine the Lord saying, "That is right. That's not good."

And then I will see somebody else with the kind of dedication in a particular area that I used to have and I say, "Ah, I am suffering."

The Lord says, "Good, that is good suffering. Those are wounds of love."

REPENT AND ACT

Paragraph C. After you remember, now repent. In other words, there is a time where you repent and change your mind. You change your life vision and you bring it up to date, where it needs to be. A lot of people—you know how they lose their way? Just by the believers they hang out with. I have seen more on-fire believers over the years lose their fire because they are with other believers who say, "Oh, do not worry about it." They make light of devotion. They say, "Ah, the Lord will be with you, don't worry. It is grace, grace, grace." And over the years I just see the fire go out.

He says, "Repent, get that vision back and do the first works" (Rev. 2:5, paraphrased). In other words, do the things that fan the flame when your heart was on fire. Do the things. What did you do a year or two ago, or ten or twenty years ago? What did you actually do? What was your schedule? What did you do with your money? What did you do with your body? What did you do with your time back in those days? Do it again.

Paragraph D. He says, "If you don't, I will remove your lampstand" (v. 5, paraphrased)—in other words, "Your influence, the way I have given it to you. Because I do not want you multiplying the error that you have.'" Because sometimes when things are going well, people get intoxicated by the growth of their ministry, the growth of their business, or what God has given them. They get intoxicated by the growth and distracted by it. And the Lord says, "No, I have to wake you up; I love you too much. So I will make you 'un-intoxicated' by your growth. I will make you grow from five down to three so that your heart can grow. And you will be thankful that I did this, when you meet Me face to face."

THE PROMISE

Roman numeral VI. He talks about the promise. "I will give you to eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7, paraphrased). I think I will just leave you with this. I am not going to develop this. I think there is something particular with that phrase: "In the midst of the Paradise of God." Part of this promise is not just general, because it is only for them if they repent. I think there are different proximities to the throne of God in the New Jerusalem,

in the age to come. This is indicating a truth along those lines. I will just leave it there because the Scripture is not really precise on that.

It is a promise only given to them. I mean, here they are; they are diligent, they are not weary, they are persevering. They are fully saved, they are on fire. They are going to heaven. That is not the issue He is talking about. He is not saying, "If you do not get your love on fire, then in spite of all of your service, somehow you are going to end up in hell." He is not talking about that. He is giving a genuine reward for them if they will break through in the area of love. It is something that is beyond what is automatic. I look at that and I say, "Lord, tell me more."

The Lord probably whispers back and says, "You know what, we will figure it out when you get here. You just be hot in love and you will not be sorry when you get here, when you see what this Paradise and what this tree of life is."

All believers participate in it, but I think there are different dimensions of it.

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

Page 5, Roman numeral VIII. God's first priority. I just want to press in on this subject. Jesus said, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind" (Mt. 22:37, paraphrased). Jesus now defines this as the first commandment (Mt. 22:38), obviously connected to the first of the ten commandments: "You shall have no other gods before you," and "You shall love the Lord your God." In the Lord's mind, both of them are two sides of one reality. To have no other gods before you is paramount to loving Him with all of your heart. It is the first commandment, paragraph A. The Holy Spirit is restoring the first commandment to the church worldwide right now. He wants to do it in you and in me.

We must cultivate responsiveness to God. It is not automatic. As a matter of fact, diminishing our love for God is what is automatic. Cultivating it takes an intentional focus and it takes time to do it. You cannot do it on the run. It is so easy to backslide right here at IHOP–KC. You can have the flame, so to speak, the imagery of the flame on the altar, and never be warmed by it, yet be in this room all the time. It is very possible to go to the finest restaurant in the world, study the menu, underline the menu, memorize it, tell people about it, but never eat the food from the menu. You can sit in this room and your heart is never warmed by the fire, if you do not connect at the heart level. It is really easy to do because the IHOP–KC ministry is growing so fast. There are so many open doors. I say, "Lord, this is shark-infested waters."

The growth I am talking about, I believe, is the beginning of an explosive growth curve. That is troubling more than exciting. I say, "What manner of men and women do we have in our midst, from the twenty-year-olds to the eighty-year-olds who can sustain an increase of responsibility without their heart shrinking in a couple of years' period, in the midst of that increased responsibility?"

GOD'S FIRST PRIORITY
Paragraph B. Loving Jesus with all of our heart is the first commandment. It is not the first option. It is a commandment. Why is it first? It is God's first priority. You can easily find multitudes of Christians who will talk you out of this. They will make anything first besides this. However, God says, "This is first." He is the One we are going to stand before.

I remember talking to one guy and he said, "You do not need to do this, that, and the other." He was talking about some of the things I was doing in my lifestyle of pressing into God.

And I said, "If you can convince me that your vote counts where I am going, at the judgment seat, I will listen to you. If you cannot convince me, I love that you love me, but you are not being helpful at all. Will you be there and will your vote count when I am standing before the Lord?"

"Well, no."

"Well then, I have to go with the Bible. The Bible says this is the first one. This is true and it is proven. You are nice, but this is proven."

I mean it. You can find a multitude of believers who will figure out a reason why the first commandment is not first. They will keep the term "first," but when it becomes first in your time and your money, it begins to be invasive in our lives. It is the highest lifestyle that anybody can live. There is no other, higher lifestyle than embracing the first commandment. It will always lead to the second commandment if you embrace it in truth. We need a revelation of the supremacy of this commandment, how it truly is first—the nobility and supremacy of this life vision.

Beloved, the first commandment is not getting the biggest ministry, the most money; being the happiest, the prettiest, the coolest, the best. That is not the first commandment. We need a revelation of the supremacy and nobility of this commandment in and of itself, nothing added to it.

IT IS THE GREAT COMMANDMENT
Paragraph C. It is the great commandment. It is not only first; it is great. It is great in impact. It impacts your heart. You know, when you love God with all your heart—you know what? You will love yourself more in the right way. You will love your neighbor, because you will never love your neighbor more than you love yourself. The key to really loving other people is actually not despising yourself.

The lady prays, "Oh, Lord, I want to love my neighbor as much as I love myself."

The Lord says, "That is the problem. You hate yourself. That is why you hate your neighbor."

It is true. You will love yourself properly and in a healthy, wholesome way, when you love God with all of your heart. Then you begin to see yourself in the way He sees you and you see the value that He puts on you.

You say, "Wow, in that case, I must be pretty cool. I must be pretty valuable to You. If I am, and I love You, then I will go ahead and like myself. You love me and I love You; you know what, I will connect the dots." It is really true, though. It seems a little funny, but it actually works that way.

"Lord, if I were You, being honest, I would not have picked myself, but You did. I love You, so I am voting for myself all the way. Let's go all the way. I am just going to go ahead and like myself, because You do. I do not see it, but hey, I am going with You." This sounds cute, but it is real. And then you will love people a lot better too.

It will have the greatest impact on you, on the kingdom, and on the lost. You may not make as much impact in the immediate next week or month, but in the next ten or twenty years, you will make far more impact by putting first things first.

CONNECTING WITH THE LORD

Paragraph D. Service, all kinds of service without a heart-connect with God leads to burnout, disappointment, and wounding. The people who work really hard and love God little attend to their heart little. And because they are so consumed with their work, they end up burning out. They end up getting wounded in one or two decades and they end up not staying steady for the long haul—five, eight, or ten decades, whatever God gives them. I am interested in going for the long haul, with perseverance. Not just going hot for three, five, or ten years of red-hot service; no, I want to see you do it for fifty years and seventy years, and loving God.

The first commandment being first is the only possible way you can stay the course in a consistent way. There are too many ways to get burned out, to get mad, and to get hurt by people, unless you are connecting with the Lord. Then, even though things do not go well, something is alive at the heart level.

THE ANOINTING TO LOVE GOD

Paragraph E. The anointing to love God is the supernatural ability to feel God's love and to love Him back. The reward of a lover is found in the power to love. The anointing to love is our reward. I mean, I want the breakthrough. I want a million souls saved and all the billions—whatever number—I want it all. I want the breakthrough, but you know what? The reward we get day by day is the anointing, the ability to love and to feel love back from God. While you are waiting for the breakthrough and people are treating you wrongly, you can have that reward day by day to sustain you for the long haul. God's primary command for my life and yours is to grow in love.

The Lord did not say, "Mike, the number one thing is to make sure that IHOP–KC is big." No, He said, "Make sure your heart is big. I will take care of IHOP–KC. You just make sure your heart is big."

I do not have to worry about the size of IHOP–KC. I need to concern myself with the size of my heart. If our ministry assignment becomes number one and our heart-connect with God becomes number two, we get really burned out and bruised. It may take five or ten years, but it will happen.

Paragraph G. The end-time saints are victorious in love. The Antichrist throws the biggest temptations and the greatest outrage of persecution, and the end-time church is victorious in love at the end. My point being that the first commandment will be successfully restored before Jesus returns.

THE JOY OF ABANDONMENT

Paragraph I. Do you remember the first time when you felt the joy of abandonment? Remember the first time you heard the call to extravagant devotion? You said yes and felt the exhilaration of love. The Lord says, "I want to renew that in you. For all of your days. Not just for a summer. I want you to feel the exhilaration of abandonment all of your days, even though things are difficult and the struggle is tough."

People who are seeking to be wholly devoted to the Lord ask, "What is the most You will empower me to give You?" They are not content with the minimum requirements. The person—the man and woman in love is not asking, "What can I get away with?" They are asking, as the song says which we sing, "How far will You let me go? How abandoned will You let me be?"

We are talking about living in humility, in denying the flesh, in servanthood without getting credit for it, because we do it in the eyes of Jesus, sitting at His feet, turning things away to make time for our heart to grow. "How far will You let me go in these realities?"

THE NEED TO GO DEEP

Paragraph K. Jesus said, "Mary chose the good part." Nobody can choose it for you. Nobody can choose the good part for you.

Paragraph L. We must set our heart to grow deeper. We need to have a sustained vision to go deeper. Is it your sustained vision to be happy? For a lot of people in the kingdom, their number-one vision is mostly just to be happy. They say, "If I get a really godly husband or wife and the kids are cool, the ministry is good enough and the money is sufficient—hey, I am in, have some cool friends, I do not get sick too often—hey, that works." No. No! That does not work. Your number-one vision must not be to have a big ministry, a successful ministry. Make that number two, three, four, wherever you put it. The number-one reason you breathe on the earth must be to go deep at the heart level with God. That must be your life vision, a crystal-clear life vision.

Sustaining a fresh walk with God, paragraph M, for decades. Not a few months. Some people say, "I want to be radical." What they mean is that they want to do a three-month program, maybe a three-year program. No, radical is decades. Radical is not what you do for three months in the summer somewhere. That is mostly called boredom with home. Radical is what we sustain for decades. That is radical.

ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE

Pressing in when our sin hits us, and the people get mad at us; the anointing is not there. The Lord is saying, "I like this, I like this."

David said, "All the days of my life." That is the remarkable thing about David. It was not just about his exploits, but he pressed in all the days of his life. He had a lot of failures, but even in his failures he was not in despair and just quit. He didn't say, "I am so sinful, forget it." Boy, he had a lot of failures. He pushed delete and signed up for the battle to be a wholehearted lover. He went right back hard after God that same night. He said, "I am yours, God, all the days of my life. I am setting my heart."

Daniel did the same thing. Here he is in his eighties. This verse in Daniel 6:10 (paraphrased) says, "Daniel prayed three times a day, as was his custom from his youth." From his teens to his eighties, and he is still doing it. Oh, my goodness. Amen.

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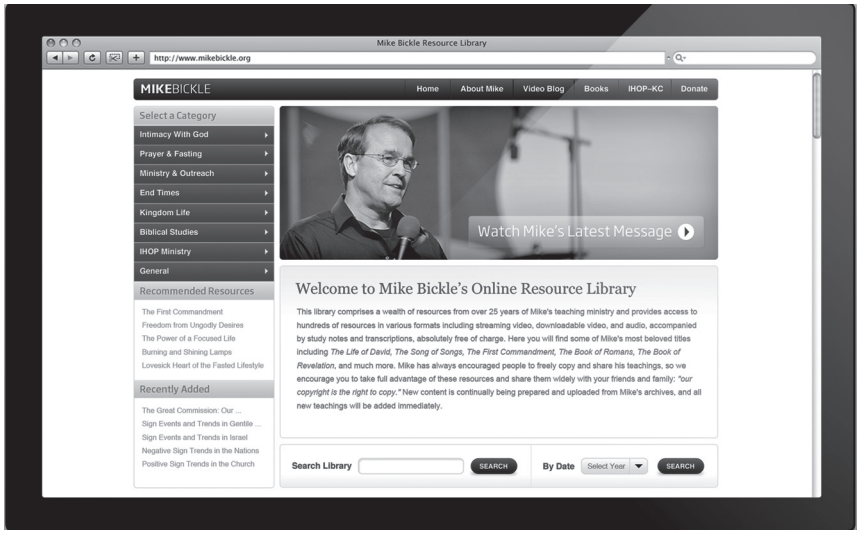

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