

Good AM church family – for those of you who've been gone throughout the summer – welcome back. For those who've been here throughout the summer – thanks for all you've done to make this a spectacular summer of ministry.

- VBS – over 400 kids
- We had a spectacular 4th of July Celebration
- Mission Trips to Spain, Calgary, East TN
- Lunch Bunch fed over 300 kids each week
- Ministry at the Bridge touched 100's of lives
- And we've shared the Gospel all along the way
- And how I meeting together in one serviced

Last Sunday, for those who've been away, we kicked-off the **Unleashed** Initiative – calling our church to free our hearts and our resources for the sake of the glory of God. And let me say – this endeavor must be more than a capital campaign to set us free from indebtedness – it must be about setting our hearts free to BE engaged in God's great mission.

Several years ago, before my time, our church family decided to stay in PTC and create a ministry center to impact our community – the Bridge. In the process, we also made some needed improvements on this side of the road. In doing so, the church incurred a debt exceeding \$6 mil.

Over the past few years, we've faithfully managed/paid our debt as we've diligently engaged in Gospel ministry. It's never significantly impeded ministry, but it has been present to remind us of what we could be doing if it wasn't there. Over the past few years, a number of members have asked about a plan to unleash our church from this indebtedness. And the time has come for us to address it. Personally, I am excited and ready – and I believe our church is ready.

BUT I want you to hear me clearly – this initiative is **NOT** about indebtedness – it is about the heart of our church and stewarding the Gospel. If we alleviate the debt but our hearts are not released into the heart of the Father, then this was all for naught. If we payoff our mortgage but do not embrace the mission – then we've missed the point. This is what I want to speak w/ you about this AM. **Turn to Revelation 2.**

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and perseverance. I know you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not

repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Many pastors/churches have a church model they follow – some follow the Northpoint model – some Saddleback or Willow Creek – or some other prolific church. **My church model is the church at Ephesus** – and for several reasons:

- It was a founding church – closer to Jesus' intention
- I know it was birthed as a result of the work of the H.S. – instead of out of man's ingenuity and efforts
- It is the most talked about church in the Bible
- (6) books and (8) major passages give us insight into the church's teachings, organization, and impact
- The church had impeccable leadership – founded by the Apostle Paul, pastored by his protégé Timothy – and later pastored by the Apostle John (talk about a great team – when 2/3 of your team wrote 3/4 of the NT...)
- It was the one early church that transformed their city

Basic Overview of Paul's work in Ephesus – Acts 19

- Acts 19 – Paul left Apollos in Corinth for Ephesus
- On arrival he found (12) Jews baptized by John the Baptist in repentance but didn't have regenerate hearts – so they're just doing their best to honor God but are exhausted b/c they don't have God's power. After Paul explains the truth, they're genuinely saved and all heaven breaks loose
- They go to the temple and open areas w/ Paul and for 2 yrs. talk to everyone about Jesus – and people get saved
- Then an unbelievable event takes place – Sons of Sceva

If you're not familiar w/ the story – b/c God is moving in an unbelievable way in Ephesus – literally the Gospel was being shared w/ everyone and lives were being transformed by God's grace – so much so, that the pagan idol industry was going under. So these (7) exorcist brothers start trying to cast out demons in the name of Paul's God. Well, things don't go so well. The demon says – I know Paul (he's not here is he? And I know Jesus – but you... not so much – and a beat-down ensues. Listen – when you get beat so badly you no longer have pants – you lost the fight.

Notice what happens next – ¹⁷ *When this became known to the Jews/Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized w/ fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them*

publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to 50,000 drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

God's Spirit fell and the city was transformed – so I don't think there's a better church for a church to pattern itself after if it wants to make a Gospel difference – **but it was far from a perfect church.**

I Three Admirable QUALITIES

I know your deeds, your hard work and perseverance. I know you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

The church at Ephesus was a stellar church – so much so that God commended the church for (3) reasons.

A They were Great Commission DRIVEN

The church at Ephesus was hard at work doing great things in God's name desiring to impact others. They were busy, busy, busy in Jesus' name.

B They were Sound in DOCTRINE

The church at Ephesus knew the Word of God and could pick out a heretic/false teach from a mile away.

C They were Steadfastly DILIGENT

And they were steadfast in a highly pagan culture. Ephesus was the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire – and the home of the Temple of Artemis. And yet this church boldly was standing up and trying to impact the culture around them.

II One Major ISSUE

You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Something big has happened. Jesus tells them they're a role model church in every way yet somehow, somewhere along the way – they lost their fervor... they're burden... they're mojo. Somehow Jesus and the kingdom were no longer the object of their affection. They were engaged in good things in God's name – but their love for God was no longer their driving passion. It was ministry for the sake of ministry and the sake of their reputation – they'd lost their way.

Don't miss the warning – I will take my presence from you – I'll walk out of your church and let you fend for yourself.

To get what's happened we have to look back to Acts 19 – *When this became known to the Jews/Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized w/ fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.*

- They lost their wonder for the Lord
- They lost their compassion for lostness
- They put a greater priority on their comfort/safety
- They valued their preference over God's purposes

When our preferences precede Christ as our priority – God's will can't be experienced in or through our lives.

This is what happened at Ephesus. Despite all their external religious qualities, the fatal cancer of “me” was eating them alive – and they lost their first love.

We learn from them that it's possible to serve, sacrifice, and even suffer for God yet not really be in love w/ Him. We learn it's possible to be theologically astute yet spiritually immature – biblically literate but in need of spiritual growth.

- They had SEPARATION; but lacked ADORATION.
- They had LABOR; but forgot LOVE.
- They had PIETY; but neglected PURITY.
- They had SERVICE; but refused SACRIFICE.

This same cancer is spreading among the church today.

- Sadly, many believers have become more concerned w/ how we do something than for Whom we do it.
- Some have become more concerned about their political correctness than their personal connectedness.
- Some are more concerned about the songs we sing than about the Savior for whom we sing them.
- Too many have become more concerned about being right than we are about being righteous.

The problem is the majority of Christians don't realize that busyness for God is not the same as intimacy w/ God

We've been lulled into losing our first love like a frog in a kettle. And all the symptoms are present.

Burn Out – Fade Out– Give Out – Cop Out – Drop Out

And instead of returning to God we put up a spiritual façade thinking no one will see through us. *Rather than facing God we put on a face for God.*

I know... b/c I had become really good at it! I could put on my Sunday best w/ the best of them and play the part – but inside I was running on empty. I lost Jesus at church – doing church. I once lost my first love.

Christianity isn't going to church; it's engaging in an intimate, authentic and personal relationship w/ the Creator. It is knowing and experiencing God.

If we don't get this straight, we'll lose our first love and exchange a joyful relationship for a joyless religion.

III One Simple SOLUTION

The solution was simple – return to your first love and to the belief that God can change even the most wicked/deplorable life – that God is still in the miracle.

Rediscover the wonder and rekindle your passion for the Lord – seek first His kingdom and righteous. Respond to the pleading of the H.S. and allow your heart to be unleashed to the heart of God.