



## SEVEN WORDS WORTH HEARING

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On May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1969, astronauts aboard Apollo 10 were awakened by a strange sound they had never heard before in space. It was the voice of Robert Goulee singing, “On a Clear Day, You Can See Forever.”

Someone in Houston thought that would be the perfect lyric for them to hear as they looked out the window and saw Earth thousands of miles away. The tradition has continued ever since. Mission control carefully hand picks songs to play as wake up calls each day of a space flight. They take it very seriously. No two trips get the same playlist – it is tailored for the individual crew. The music has a purpose: it is intended to inspire the astronauts, to build a sense of camaraderie and to support whatever the mission is for that day.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to look at some wake up calls that Jesus himself sent. He delivered seven wake up calls to seven different “crews”. Each one was tailored to a particular church and was intended to inspire them, to build camaraderie and encourage them to stick with their mission.

Spending time with these wake up calls seems like a fitting way to follow up what we talked about last Sunday. We introduced a theme for 2010 that is All In, All Out & All Up. Our desire for New Day is to be a community where we’re all in -- everybody taking ownership of the vision. We want to be all out – not playing church but betting the farm on Jesus. And we want to be all up – looking up so we reflect God’s glory, standing up and letting people know what he’s doing in our lives.

Life is too short to not be intentional about what we’re doing.

My message title last week was, “If You’re Listening to This...” which begs the question, “listening to what?” Well this week, we’re launching a series I’m calling, “Seven Words Worth Hearing.” One word from each wake up call. As you may have guessed, I’m taking this from the seven letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation.

If you’ve ever read any of Revelation, you know it’s a wild piece of work. There is so much mysterious and sometimes alarming imagery in the book that it can end up being one part of the Bible we avoid. Or we may get so fascinated by it that we head off on a

rabbit trail where we get so caught up in the possibilities it presents that we miss the main point.

But the central message of the book is very direct and very important. And you can grasp it from the very first verse:

**Revelation 1:1**

*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.*

This book is a revelation of Jesus. It shows us more of him. And it prepares us for what's to come. As we mentioned last week, life is short and there is a lot of evil out there in the world. We need all the tools and preparation we can get to live for Christ in these times.

When John wrote Revelation, he had been exiled for his faith to the island of Patmos, a 13 square mile patch of land off the coast of Greece. While he was there, he had this vision that he wrote down to motivate and encourage Christians who were facing intense opposition. I can't quite fathom how it would feel to know you could be beaten, imprisoned or executed just because you believe in Jesus. But that's something Christians worldwide have had to endure since the beginning. There were actually more martyrs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in any previous period of history. From the Boxer Rebellion in China to Stalin's regime to various communist or Muslim countries, the number of Christians who died for their faith was staggering.

We may never experience that black and white of opposition, but it is difficult to follow Christ in our culture, too. George Barna used the illustration of a frog in a kettle. Since it is cold blooded, the frog won't notice the temperature changing around it even if the water starts to boil. The church can be so immersed in its surroundings that we don't even see how our witness is being weakened. Like we said last week, the devil doesn't need much to take us out. Sometimes he uses direct attacks and other times he comes from behind.

But Revelation is intended to be a book that speaks with power into the most challenging situations for people trying to follow Christ in any era. It is a perfect starting point for learning how to be all in, all out and all up for God.

In his vision, John comes face to face with Jesus himself – not as John may have remembered him looking on earth, but in all his glory. I want to read that section to provide the backdrop for where we're going.

**Revelation 1:9-2:7**

*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven*

*churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

*I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

*"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

It has been said that the Inuits have over 50 words to describe snow. When you're surrounded by it year round, you get to know all the subtle nuances. The rest of us are not nearly as close to the white stuff, so when there's a sudden snowfall, we don't have the vocabulary to adequately label it.

John found his vocabulary wasn't big enough to handle this picture he was seeing. He had to resort to comparisons to describe it. Jesus' hair was white LIKE wool. His voice was LIKE rushing water. His face was LIKE the sun. No words could fully convey the overpowering beauty.

The vision is so intense that we almost forget what John said he saw first, which was these seven golden lampstands, or candlesticks. We learn though that these lampstands represent seven real churches John was connected to.

Seven in the Bible typically represents completion or wholeness, so to talk about the seven churches not only refers to the ones named, but also to the church universal, in every place and every time.

Jesus dictates to John seven different letters, one addressed to each of those churches. While each one includes details that only applied to that one church, all the letters contain universal truths. We may not be in exactly the same circumstances, but the call to be all in, all out and all up translates across time and space. As we go through these, my prayer is that we will remember that these words were spoken by that mouth with the double edged sword, and that they will cut through the clutter and reach our hearts.

In case you have not heard these seven letters before, I want to help you gain a mindset for listening to them. Each one of these letters is a sword. It cuts through imagination and image and reveals what is working and what isn't.

Before we read each letter, I want to remind you that when you have given your life to Christ, there is no need to be afraid of truth. The Bible says it will set us free. Let's stop and pray for a moment that God would enable us to hear what he's speaking to each of us.

This morning, we'll take a look at the first of the seven letters, the letter to Ephesus. Jesus is talking to John and he says this:

**Revelation 2:1-7**

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

*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which 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.*

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

There may be many perplexing parts to Revelation, but these letters are crystal clear. This letter has probably the most basic of all the messages: Christ is calling his church back to their first love. Word #1 is love.

It's not by accident that this would be the starting letter. When Jesus was on earth, love was his dominant message. I'll just remind you of two of his most famous quotes:

**Matthew 22:37-40**

*Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

**John 13:34-35**

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

Clearly, this was the central theme of his time on earth. So if Jesus saw that as missing in his followers, it makes sense for that to be the first thing he points out.

What's a little unsettling is who he spoke these words to. Because I think from the outside, Ephesus looked like a church that loved Jesus a lot.

These were not people on the fence: They were working hard for God. They were sticking it out through tough times. They were standing up against sin.

Woody Allen once said that 80% of success is just showing up. That could describe the Ephesians. They were show up kind of people. You could count on them to be there. Jesus gives them full credit for their dependability and commitment.

And yet it wasn't what he was looking for. These were good, moral, upstanding people. But their hearts were no longer in it. Their activity was just activity. So it rang hollow.

It's like what Paul told the church in Corinth. Let me read it for you from the Message translation because it's a little different than what we traditionally hear:

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-3**

*If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.*

*If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.*

*If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.*

Activity does not make a relationship with God. Good morals do not make a relationship with God. Church attendance and charitable giving don't make a relationship with God. Even hating the things God hates is no basis for a relationship with him.

G.B. Caird once said, "Zeal for Christian truth may obliterate the one truth that matters, that God is love."

It's easy to be fired up and busy with what we think is God's work, only to discover we've missed the whole point.

I loved it when Ron Delzer shared his story a couple years ago. He was one of the people who went on the D'Iberville trip from OSBC. I knew Ron from years ago. He came to church faithfully. He was an usher. He helped count money. He would occasionally

play his saxophone. But he never gave his heart to God. He was there because his wife wanted him to be there and that was it.

It wasn't until one of those mission trips where God used the love of the people he was helping to melt Ron's heart to the love of Christ. He is a different person today than he was before. And it was love that made all the difference.

None of us would like to think we're in the boat of having forsaken our first love. But if it could happen to the Ephesians, it could happen to anybody. We start out motivated by love for God and love for his people. Then we begin going through our routines and before you know it we are moving through the motions and we've lost sight of why we began in the first place.

So how can we tell if Jesus' words are true of us? And what do we mean by first love? Everyone is in a different spot when it comes to their feelings about God, how passionate they are about serving him, what takes up our attention. We all have different personalities and temperaments that make each of our relationships with God unique. So the idea of forsaking our first love will look different depending on who we are. But I think we can examine our own hearts a little more specifically by breaking out three different aspects of "first love" and what it means to forsake it.

The first one could refer to **chronological** order. If someone refers to their kindergarten sweetheart and says, "She was my first love," what they really are talking about is the first person in a sequence. That first love has been **replaced** by a second or third or fourth love. It is a previous or former love.

First can also refer to first **priority**. In that case, forsaking is not so much about a first love being replaced as being **downgraded**. You see that in the movies where the absentee father is never there for his children because he's working. They have taken a backseat to other interests. His love for his kids is less than something else.

Those are probably the most common ways we think about forsaking a first love. But I think there's one more way we use the word. It's not always about chronology or priorities. Sometimes it's about **joy**. You might hear someone say, "I like football, but my first love is basketball." They have no responsibility to it – it's just something they thoroughly appreciate because it feeds their soul. In that case, forsaking your first love is to **neglect** it.

We can take inventory and evaluate our own love of God in each of these categories. Has anything changed from what it used to be? Maybe Christ was an early interest of mine. Chronologically, it's been a long time since I put my faith in him. Maybe since that time, other things have come along that have replaced him as a passion for me. Maybe we've been disappointed in Jesus, so we're keeping our distance. We had expectations he didn't meet, a prayer he didn't answer. So we've moved on.

Or maybe I still would say I love him if it came down to that, but my priorities have shifted and he's on the fringes of my life. He's been downgraded. I've got enough Jesus to call myself religious, but not enough to make any real difference in how I live.

What may be the most common way to abandon Jesus as our first love is simply neglecting the relationship. The stresses and busyness of life crowds in and we forget the joy that Jesus brings.

Any way you look at it, there are many ways we can forsake Christ on one level or another. And that sounds incredibly bleak. But the whole reason Jesus talks about it is to give hope. Forsaken does not mean lost forever. We can get love back. And there is nothing complicated or clever to the process.

First, Jesus says "Remember."

*Remember the height from which you have fallen!*

In *The Sound of Music*, there's a scene where Frauline Maria and Captain Von Trapp are arguing. He is angry over what she allowed his kids do while he was away, so he confronts her. But in the middle of their conflict, the children start singing in the background, and it catches him off guard as he hears the first strains of the song. The Captain had not permitted any singing since his wife had died. But when he heard his children singing, it transformed him. He says, "Thank you Frauline. You brought music back into this house. I had forgotten."

We need to let the song of Christ into our minds, because we forget. We forget what he's done for us, we forget who he is, we forget what he's capable of. We are called to remember who exactly it is that we love. That's why I'm so glad John started out with such a compelling picture of Christ at the beginning. That's our God. And I'm equally glad Jesus started out the letter to Ephesus by saying this:

*These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

The magnificent, awesome Christ John described has those seven stars firmly in his hand. They are in his grip. And Jesus walks among his lampstands, his churches. He is right here with us in whatever we face and whatever we go through. Knowing that this glorious, powerful person is in complete control and present with us is an awesome comfort. And it is the kind of big vision we need to remind us why we love God so much.

The word for remember is the Greek is also translated, "be mindful." I like that. Have your mind full of your first love. That's really what romantic first love is like, isn't it? Your mind is full of the other person. You think about them all the time.

It's no different with Christ. What will we do to refill our minds with him and not just activities on his behalf?

The second thing Jesus tells the Ephesians to do is "Repent."

Repent is a word we associate with groveling and tearful apologies. But it's far more practical and sensible than that. It simply means to turn around. Wherever you are, whichever direction you are facing, you choose to simply turn and go the other way.

Imagine the words "first love" on one side of a page, and a big long line leading away from it. Then think about where you feel you are in relationship to Jesus as your first love. You might be half an inch away. You might be clear on the other side of the page. No matter what the distance, the solution is always the same: Repent. Turn. When you do, you will find that God meets you wherever you are on that line. It turns out that on the line back, we are always the same distance from him. As Alfred Lord Tennyson said, "Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

When Karin and I are out driving somewhere we've never been and we get lost through no fault of my own, you will sometimes hear me say, "I don't think this is right. I think we passed it." At which point Karin will inevitably say, "Well, we can always turn around." And a few miles further down the road, I just might.

We can always turn around. That's the beauty of repentance. It is always available to us. The most humbling act is also the most empowering. And we can do it as often as we find ourselves going the wrong direction.

Without it, we will never get back to our first love.

Finally, Jesus tells the church to "Restart."

*do the things you did at first.*

The Ephesians were already doing a whole lot. As we saw already, their lives were filled with activity. What more is it that Jesus is expecting them to do?

Scholars say that the word for "things" the church has to do isn't so much talking about specific works or deeds as what occupied them in general. It's an all-encompassing word for everything they did. A way of life kind of word. Jesus is asking them to live like first love people – Being grateful for the love God had given them, so in turn loving others.

If we want to be more loving, it isn't going to come by trying to whip up more loving feelings or to lay out a list of nice things we can do for someone else. That will only add to the pile of obligations we are already feeling. What will bring us back to where we started is to remember that God loved us first. He is the good parent, and he shows us how we are to love. And the God who IS love will certainly help us in our desire to love him back.

As we reflect on God's love, it will take us to a place of gratitude that will spill over to how we treat each other. It goes back to that quote from Jesus we read earlier: Love one another as I have loved you. We need to know deeply how much he loves us in order to have something to share with one another. We can be forgiving because of how he has forgiven. We can be accepting and encouraging and comforting because of the acceptance, encouragement and comfort we have found in him.

This is why Revelation is first and foremost the revelation of Jesus himself. It's not the revelation of what we need to do: it's the revelation of who he is. We need to see him more and more clearly in order to live as first love kind of people.

And it's urgent that we do so. The consequences of NOT returning to their first love was going to be disastrous for the Ephesians:

*If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*

Lampstands are in place to provide light. Jesus tells them if they can't remember how to love, they will cease to give light.

The only way Jesus said the world would recognize us as his followers was through our love for one another. It is the sign of his presence in a community. Without love, we are no longer reflecting the heart of Jesus. We can be teaching good ethics and living right and avoiding sin. But we will no longer be giving light.

A happy side note on the Ephesians. We have a letter written to them 20 years after Revelation by Ignatius of Antioch. In that letter, Ignatius praises them for their harmonious love and he singles out their bishop, Onesimus, as a man of "inexpressible love." The church had taken this word from Jesus to heart. They regained their first love and continued to be a bright spot for years to come.

Back in 2003, wildfires were raging through British Columbia, and 20,000 people had to be evacuated from their homes in the city of Kelowna. Willow Park Church was on evacuation alert as well, so they thought about just cancelling services. But they decided to go ahead and open the doors, thinking no one would probably come.

But people came by the hundreds. The place was packed out. And all these people who were in danger of losing their homes and neighborhoods came and cried out to God.

They sang

Jesus hope of the nations  
Jesus comfort for all who mourn  
You are the source of heaven's hope on earth  
Jesus light in the darkness  
Jesus truth in each circumstance

That's getting back to first love. Everything else in life can be stripped away. Homes can burn. Relationships change. Money disappears. But the love of Christ remains for us to the end.

How do Christ's words hit you this morning? Do you feel like you've abandoned your first love? If we're honest, we're probably all in some stage of forsaking him at any given moment. There are a million things to take the place of Jesus in our hearts. You might even be thinking, "He was never my first love to begin with. I wouldn't know how to get back to that place."

Before you lose heart, I would just remind you of one line Jesus said at the very beginning of Revelation:

*Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!*

If anyone knows how to resurrect something that's dead, it's Jesus. Even lost love. If anyone can put something there that never was, it's him.

Remember, return and restart. We can always, always turn around. And when we do, we will find ourselves staring into the face of the one with the eyes that burn like fire, waiting with open arms, saying, "Don't be afraid. I am the first and the last."