



# "Exchangers"

Unedited Transcript from 7/23/17

Justin Beamer

Mifflin County Community Church

[mc3Church.org](http://mc3Church.org)

## Introduction

I was getting ready to start my senior year at Messiah College, and I was on campus a week early because I was serving as an apartment life coordinator. This meant helping to oversee about a dozen apartments in the building where I was living. There were about 12 or 15 of us in this role, and we were on campus early to spend several days doing team building exercises. It was here that I first met her – she was 5 feet of spunk and fun, she was full of personality and very outgoing. To top it off, she was pretty cute. And despite the fact that she had several guys' attention (that I know of, there may have been more), it didn't take me long to be interested in her.

When I was around her, I felt that crazy mix of emotions that a person feels when they're attracted to someone – those butterflies in the stomach, those heart skip a beat kind of feelings. You know – when your hands get sweaty and your knees get weak, and you can't eat and you can't sleep (to quote a classic country song by Alan Jackson). And when I wasn't around her, I was thinking about ways that I could be around her, to spend time with her, to get to know her better.

In fact, getting to know her became a top priority for me. I wanted to spend as much time with her as I possibly could. I wanted to show her that I cared about her and that she was important to me and that I liked her. A LOT! In that boy likes girl kind of way! And throughout my senior year, I planned and orchestrated various instances for this to work out in my favor. And some of those plans turned out a little crazy.

Like the time I stayed up all night with her working on a project for our Biochemistry class. It was this awesome poster that detailed the amino acid cycle and proteins and enzymes and sugar converting to energy – all that stuff that us science nerds found fascinating. And it was really creative – it was at Christmastime, so we had some of the amino acids traveling on a toy train to whatever part of the cycle they were going to, and snowmen represented something else. And then there was Santa Claus, and he contained the fatty acid cycle (get it, fatty acid?!) But here's the thing - I think this was the only time in my whole college career that I pulled an all-nighter. I was willing to sacrifice sleep, a whole night of sleep in fact, to spend time with her.

Or how about the time that we went to Haar's Drive-In in Dillsburg, just the two of us. We were going to see the movie Titanic (as a side note – we were just friends at this point, and she would later tell me that's all she wanted to be. But if seeing Titanic with



someone isn't a case of leading them on, I don't know what is!) After the movie had ended (she slept through half of it, and I don't think she's ever seen the whole movie to this day), we decided that we were hungry. And we couldn't believe how many half-eaten snack bar items had been left by people in the parking lot. So, being the environmentally conscious science majors that we were, we started going around eating leftover popcorn and cookies and Doritos and whatever else we could find. And then I happened to find a half-drunk Pepsi (and, like Bill, I love Pepsi), so I ended up having some of that as well. Why in the world would I do this and risk slobber and spit and backwash and disease and whatever else that may have been out in that drink or on those food items? Because she made me a little crazy – I wasn't always in my right mind when I was around her.

My point is this – when our relationships are new, we act differently. We think differently. We feel differently. Everything that I did and said when I was around Steph, the crazy things and the not crazy things, was rooted in my feelings for her, my love for her.

And if you've had a love relationship before, you know what I'm talking about. You can remember back to the way you felt when you first met that special someone (and if you're married, I highly recommend thinking back to your husband or wife and NOT someone else! I am not responsible for any arguments that may ensue if don't heed this advice!) And you can remember how your love for that person consumed you a bit – how you thought about them all the time, and how you talked about them constantly with your friends, and how you planned things to show them how much you cared. In some respects, that person became the center of your universe (I know God is the center of the universe, but just go with me on this).

But then, after a while, something tends to happen with our relationships. We still love the person, but the same level of crazy excitement isn't there anymore. We're not doing everything we can to spend time with that person. We're not sacrificing our sleep or our schedules like we used to. We're not thinking about them day and night like we did at first. And some of that is healthy and reflects a maturing and deepening of the relationship. For example, I don't need to stay up all night to show Steph that I love her (I would, but we stayed up until 3:00 several weeks ago and I'm not sure that I've ever recovered!) And I don't think Steph would find it charming or sweet if I went around the Mid-Way parking lot eating pizza crust after a movie. She may not kiss me ever again!

But some of this change isn't just a maturing, some of it is laziness. In other words, we settle into a routine in our relationships and things tend to get a bit stale. We grow a bit bored. We're not working as hard in the relationship as we once were. The sprint of getting to know each other is over, and all the excitement that that entails subsides. And we get to the marathon portion of the relationship, the long-lasting part, and that



often doesn't have the same level of enthusiasm and passion. I think guys know this full well – there is truth to the saying "the thrill of the chase" that is ingrained in us as men. Maybe it's our hunter/gatherer nature or our conqueror nature, I'm not sure. But when the chase is over and it's time to settle down and commit to that relationship over the long haul, that marathon portion, we can have trouble carrying over the same level of emotion that we had when we were first pursuing our spouse. (As a side note – I'm not suggesting that my marriage is boring or stale or that I miss the chase, and I'm not suggesting that I don't feel passion for my wife). But I think you can all relate to me when I discuss the differences between a new relationship and a mature relationship.

And this was a similar problem to what the early church at Ephesus was experiencing during the time that John wrote Revelation. The passion that the church had in the early days of their ministry, how they related to God and how they related to each other, had been replaced by a routine. It had gotten a bit stale. And the routine wasn't full of bad things. In fact, the church of Ephesus was doing a lot of stuff really well. But the routine was boring because it lacked the excitement the church had at first. Specifically, it lacked the love that was there when they first began.

And that leads us to our point for the day – "A Message to a Bored Church: Love Again!"

Let's read through the passage – Revelation 2:1-7

"Write this letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus. This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands:

"I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.

"But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches. But this is in your favor: You hate the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do.

"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. To everyone who is victorious I will give fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God.



## Background

In order for us to understand Scripture, any Scripture, it's really important to understand the context, or the background, of the text. So let's talk a bit about what is happening here to set up chapter 2. And some of this is review.

The book is being written by a man named John (most believe this person is the apostle John, who was known as the beloved disciple, who was one of the disciples closest to Jesus). And it's thought to have been written around AD 95, which means John was an old man at this point (Jesus would have been crucified over 60 years earlier). Interestingly, it's thought that John was the only disciple to live a long life and die of natural causes (rather than being killed as a martyr like most of the other disciples or dying by suicide (like Judas). John was writing from the island of Patmos (off the coast of what is now modern day Turkey). It's likely that he had been banished there by the ruling authorities. You see, John's message of Jesus, the one and only true king, a king for all people, would not have been received well by the powers in charge (which at this time was still the Romans). They didn't take kindly to anyone who suggested that someone other than Caesar was in charge. The Romans had many forms of punishment, some were very cruel and barbaric, but one that was a bit less extreme was to send prisoners to islands to work off their sentences. Don't think lush, tropical getaway. Not Hawaii. Think volcanic, rocky, treeless, separated from friends and family. That was Patmos.

So here's John, already in trouble for spreading the Gospel of Jesus, probably having been told by the authorities to stop spreading the Gospel of Jesus. And what's he doing in the book of Revelation? Spreading the Gospel of Jesus. A little crazy? Not crazy, just committed.

While on Patmos, John is instructed in a vision to write a message to seven churches. These were actual, physical churches at this point in history, but they certainly weren't the only churches at the time. Other churches existed in modern day Greece and Syria and Israel and so on. So, why were these seven selected out of all the others? Great question. Ask Jesus when you get to heaven and I'm sure he'll tell you. But if you study these churches as we've been doing this series, you will find that each church has its own unique situation. And it's very likely that that's why they were chosen. They all have different strengths and different weaknesses. Jesus, throughout the course of these seven letters, commends their strengths and calls out their weaknesses.

The weaknesses, the struggles, which Jesus addressed were not just unique to these churches – they've actually plagued the church throughout its history. So these letters weren't just meant for the churches they were addressed to, they were also meant to benefit the other churches at that time (they would have been shared from one to the next). The



letters were also meant for all churches from that point forward to present day, and to the days to come. So the messages of the letters have value far beyond just the original audience.

## Context

That brings us to the text for today, and we'll unpack it a little bit at a time.

In verse one, we see the letter being addressed "to the angel of the church in Ephesus." As a reminder, the term angel simply means messenger. It doesn't mean wings and halos and bows and arrows. So it is likely that the recipient of the letter is someone associated with the church – perhaps it was an overseer or a leader (a pastor, if you will) that is hearing the message that is being written by John. In turn, he (the angel, the pastor) would share the message with the church body, the congregation.

At this time, Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. It was the capital of Asia Minor. (Here's a map, there's Ephesus). It was a flourishing commercial and trade center, very wealthy, with a harbor and access to the Aegean Sea. (the site now sits miles and miles inland due to the silt that has been deposited over time). Several major roads converged on Ephesus, giving entrance to the whole interior continent. Because of this, trade goods flowing into Asia or out of Asia would have gone through Ephesus. Anyone who wanted to explore or visit the eastern part of the empire would also use Ephesus as their starting point. It was also a center of learning and art, with a theatre, marketplace and stadium (I think the team was called the Ephesian Elephants, but I can't be sure of that). Actually, the stadium would have hosted athletic events and chariot races and gladiator games, a lot of the same things you would have found in Rome at the time.

Ephesus was also a prominent religious center. They embraced emperor worship, and had temples there honoring various Roman rulers. But the main attraction, what Ephesus was really renowned for, was the Temple of Artemis. In other parts of the ancient world (such as Greece), Artemis was a lesser god (think back to learning about Greek mythology). But not in Ephesus. In Ephesus, she was the main deity, known as the "Mother Goddess" or "Queen of Heaven." She was the goddess of fertility, and her some parts of her worship were sexual in nature. Statues of Artemis show her with 50 breasts, reinforcing this fertility/sexual image.

The temple of Artemis was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world due to its incredible size. (Here's a drawing of what it may have looked like). It was a marble building, 425 feet long and 220 feet high, supported by 120 columns each 60 feet high. The inside was adorned with a multitude of sculptures and paintings. People came from throughout the world to worship and celebrate during her festivals. You can



imagine the economic impact that the temple had for the city (think Penn State's impact on State College). It was tremendous. We'll talk more about that in a bit.

Despite all of the pagan worship that was so prominent in the city, a church of Christ followers was very active there. Paul helped to establish the church during one of his missionary journeys approximately 40 years prior to John's writing. Paul would later spend three years in Ephesus, teaching and spreading the gospel. Priscilla and Aquilla (we've learned about them before) were here and had sat under Paul's teaching, and then they trained Apollos who would go on to be a gifted speaker in defense of the Gospel. After Paul left Ephesus, Timothy was sent to pastor the church (same Timothy as the books in the New Testament). It is also thought that John (the author) had lived in Ephesus before and maybe even after his time on Patmos. So the church of Ephesus was really a "Who's Who" in regards to leaders of the early church.

Scripture then goes on to state that this letter, this message, is from "the one who holds the seven stars and walks among the seven lampstands." So the speaker is none other than Jesus. The seven stars represent the leaders of the seven churches (the angels or pastors), and the fact that Jesus is holding them in his hand represents that Jesus is caring for these leaders – he is their protector and provider. But it also symbolizes Jesus' authority and strength. I get this image of holding a baby chick in your hand – you hold it gently to protect it and keep it from harm even though you could squash it at any moment. Not to be morbid or anything, just trying to get a visual. That's Jesus holding the leaders. The lampstands represent the seven churches, and Jesus walking among them shows that he is intimately involved in the life of his church. He doesn't just sit on high as a hands off God – he wants to be present with his people. He is actively seeking communion with them. He wants to be in relationship. This would be in sharp contrast to the other gods of the time, such as Artemis, who would have been viewed as unapproachable to a mere mortal.

As we begin the next section, we read that Jesus knows what is going on at Ephesus. The phrase "I know" reminds his followers of one of the attributes of God – his omniscience. He knows everything there is to know about the church. All the good stuff, the areas where they've done well. All the bad stuff, where they've fallen short. Nothing is hidden from him. Just like he knows everything about us – all our good stuff, all our bad stuff. What we do when no one's watching. What we think about that no one hears. What we say, what we feel. If that isn't a sobering thought, I'm not sure what is. That should be a bit scary for us, and it may make us feel embarrassed and ashamed. But it should also be very comforting – we have a God who cares about us so much that he wants to know all that is going on in our lives and everything about us. And even though he knows all of our crap, all of our mess ups and screw





ups, he still loves us and cares about us and wants to be in an intimate relationship with us.

Because he knows the church, he is able to offer RECOGNITION for what they have done well. And there was much to commend them for. Interestingly, the name Ephesus means “desirable” and the church here was living up to that description in many ways.

First off, the church was DILIGENT - Jesus states that he knows their deeds and their hard work. Other translations use the word toil. He knows their toil. This suggests that they were laboring for the church to the point of weariness and exhaustion – that they were giving of themselves physically. They were giving it all that they had, 110%. The passage doesn’t detail exactly what this involved, but we can assume that it meant that their faith was active. That they were being the church, being involved in the community. Perhaps this meant feeding the poor. Or taking care of the orphans and widows. Perhaps it was helping neighbors fix the whole in their straw roof or repair their flat wooden cart tire. It was likely all of these things and more. And they were doing it day in and day out. They were out there getting their hands dirty in the name of Jesus. And they were doing it with all their might.

The next thing we see about the church was that it was DETERMINED – they were commended for their perseverance, both in verse 2 and again in verse 3 where Jesus says, “you have patiently suffered for me without quitting.” The NIV says, “you have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.” It wasn’t an easy task to be a Christ follower in Ephesus. As I stated above, the city was centered around the worship of the goddess Artemis. Everything within the city focused on her temple because its economic impact was huge. In fact, the temple served as the local treasury and was the financial center, the bank, for that part of the world. Many people made their living catering to those who came to worship. Innkeepers provided rooms for those who had traveled a distance to come to the temple. Marketplace owners sold those same travelers food and drink during their stay. Craftsman created statues and idols of gold, silver and marble that would have been sold as souvenirs or miniature idols. Prostitutes provided...well, I think we all know what they provided. (I mentioned that the worship of Artemis was very sexual - all female followers of Artemis were required to spend two years in prostitution as a sign of devotion to the goddess. So, ladies, you can be thankful that we serve a God who doesn’t have such requirements!). During the time of Artemis’ festivals the population of the city would have swelled, and the money would have poured in. State College during a home football game, on steroids.

As people became Christ followers, they stopped their worship of Artemis and other pagan gods. That meant that they stopped spending money on all of her temple worship. They stopped visiting the temple prostitutes. They stopped their offerings of money and



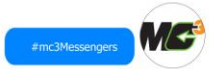
goods. They stopped buying the idols to keep in their homes. As you can imagine, the business people were none too happy about this - any threat to Artemis and her worship would have major financial consequences for them and for the city. Basically, their pocketbooks were threatened. So they were none too happy to see that the church of Christ followers was growing. This tension is found in Acts 19:25-27, where the silversmith Demetrius gathered other tradesman to complain about Paul and the followers of Jesus. And this is what Demetrius said, "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

It's not hard to imagine that word would have gotten around quickly regarding who was part of this church that was threatening to destroy the backbone of the city. Followers would have been blacklisted, marginalized. Merchants, storekeepers, may have refused to sell to them. People would likely have shunned them, they would have been considered outcasts. Perhaps they were ridiculed or taunted or beaten. All we know for certain is that they endured hardships because of Christ and they didn't quit.

The church was also DISCIPLINED - The Ephesian church didn't tolerate evil people, that's what Jesus says at the end of verse 2. They believed that Christ followers should live up to a higher standard, that sin shouldn't just be ignored. The pagan culture that surrounded them would have been constantly pressuring them to compromise, to become tolerant of things that Christ would not have tolerated. In fact, later in this passage we read about the Nicolaitans, and how the church at Ephesus hated their evil deeds, just as Jesus hated their evil deeds. Although scholars disagree as to who exactly the Nicolaitans were, it is thought that they were people who claimed to follow Jesus but didn't believe that they had to live up to his high moral standards. They weren't willing to separate themselves from the culture, so they felt free to engage in sexual immorality and idol worship. They believed that they could sin as much as they wanted because God would just turn around and forgive them. They didn't believe that their behavior truly had to change. Paul had addressed this in Romans 6:1-2, "Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? (NLT)

Lastly, the church had DISCERNMENT - The last compliment or recognition that Jesus had for the church was that they "had examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. [They] have discovered they are liars." In other words, people came to





Ephesus claiming that they were followers of Jesus, claiming that they were teaching what Jesus taught. Think of them as missionaries. The problem was that these missionaries were teaching another gospel. They were distorting the truth and distorting the Scriptures. Maybe, like the Nicolaitans, they were teaching that it was okay to sin as much as you wanted because God would forgive them. Maybe they were teaching that Jesus wasn't the only way to get to heaven. Maybe they were teaching with the wrong motives – trying to make a name for themselves or trying to get rich. We don't know, exactly. What we do know is that this wasn't a new problem. In Acts, we read about a meeting that Paul had with the elders of the Ephesian church years before. He had warned them that false teachers would come and try to lead them astray by distorting the truth. Paul told them to "watch out!" Obviously, the church had listened to Paul – they had resisted these missionaries who were distorting the truth of the gospel and they were now being commended for it.

If we ended the passage right there, we could give the church at Ephesus a big pat on the back and say, "Well done!" From all outward appearances, they were a very spiritual church. They worked hard for the Lord. They endured difficulty. They held strongly to their beliefs. They weren't fooled by people trying to lead them astray. Yeah! Go Ephesian Church! (I'm sure the MC3 Cheer Squad would be happy to lead the cheers for them!)

DEPARTED. But then we come to verse 4. After detailing all the things that the Ephesian church had been doing well, Jesus tells them where they are falling short. We go from Recognition to Rebuke. Listen to this - "But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen!" The NIV says it this way – "you have forsaken the love you had at first." The Greek wording in this sentence means to leave or depart. So the church has departed, or walked away from, the love that they had when they first started.

Here's what Jesus was saying, in a nutshell. There was a time, church, when you were full of passion and excitement in your love for me and for each other. There was a time, church, when you enjoyed being in communion with me and you enjoyed fellowship with one another and these relationships were active and growing. But then, church, something happened.

You see, you still do and say the right things. You still look the part of Christ followers. You are diligent in your work, feeding the hungry and caring for the poor. You're still determined, not abandoning your beliefs even though following me is hard. You're still disciplined, not willing to compromise the high standards that I've called you to. And you still have discernment, able to tell who is authentic in preaching my Gospel. But



your heart isn't in it. And if your heart isn't in it, then it's a waste of time and energy. If your heart isn't in it, it doesn't mean anything to me.

Ouch.

You see, WHAT the church was doing was great. But in all of their busyness in being Christ followers, they had forgotten WHY they were doing all these things – that at the center of it all needed to be a love for Jesus and for each other. Their love had gotten weak. They were in a rut. They had gotten lazy. They were going through the motions of being Christ followers, they were settled into a routine. But Jesus doesn't call us to routine...he calls us to relationship.

I need to mention that there is some disagreement as to the wording of this text. Some translations and scholars argue that the love that had gotten stale was only a love for God, that the church had grown cold in their relationship with Jesus. Others argue that the text is referring only to the love they had for each other, that it had diminished. I specifically chose the NLT version because it addresses both – a love for Jesus and for one another. And I chose it because I don't think you can have one without the other.

In Matthew 22 (37-39), Jesus said, "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."

In my opinion, you cannot truly follow the first commandment (to love God), without also following the second - because if you love God, you will have a love for those around you. And you can't truly follow the second commandment (to love your neighbor), without also following the first – because if you love your neighbor (in a godly way), it's only because God has put that desire in you in the first place. (You know the people around you and how unlovable some of them are! It's only God that gives you love for them!)

So, if the church at Ephesus had departed from the love they had for each other, then something wasn't right in their relationship with God. And if the church at Ephesus had departed from the love they had for God, then something wasn't going to be right in their relationship with each other. Love for God and love for others are intertwined, interconnected, inseparable.

Jesus then calls the church to repentance. "Turn back to me and do the works you did at first." That's exactly what repent means – to turn back or to return. If you were headed in one direction and then you did a 180 degree turn and headed in the opposite direction – you repented. According to what Jesus is saying in this passage, the church



at one time was full of love for God and for each other, and their works naturally flowed out of this love. But by the time of this letter they've gotten off track. Love is no longer their primary motivating force. And Jesus knows that if the church isn't built on love, then it is destined to fail. Jesus is calling them back to love so that their ministry can be more effective.

But what if they choose not to listen? What if they don't repent and instead continue to live the way they've been living? If they decide to live without love as the primary reason for their actions, if they don't regain that excitement and that passion. Then what? Jesus has an answer for that - "I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches." In other words, he's telling that church that if they don't make some major heart changes, then the church will no longer be effective at reaching others with the Gospel. It will stop being a light, it will stop having an impact. The punishment could also be some form of disbanding or destruction of the church. You see, when we fail to bear fruit, God raises up others in our place. And that's what Jesus is saying will happen if the church at Ephesus doesn't repent.

We don't know if the church heeded Jesus' words or not. What we do know is that the church at Ephesus no longer exists. And there have been many churches throughout history that haven't heeded Jesus' words. They started off strong, but over time things got stale and they weren't willing to repent and go back to that love relationship that they had with Jesus at first. And those churches died. And God raised up others.

As we said in our introduction, it wasn't just the church of Ephesus that was expected to heed the words of this letter. Jesus says, "Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches." Anyone. Last time I checked that was pretty inclusive. So this letter isn't just for the believers at Ephesus or the other churches of that day. It's to all the churches throughout history. And all the churches today and all the churches yet to come. ANYONE who proclaims to be a Christ follower, who hears and listens and desires to obey the Word of God, must first love God, then love each other. And then everything that is done in for Christ, all the serving and the teaching and ministering and fellowshiping, will bring honor and glory to God, exactly as God intended it.

The letter closes with this sentence, "To everyone who is victorious I will give fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God." Other translations say, "to the one who overcomes." So who is this one who is victorious, who is the one who overcomes? If we look in 1 John 5, we find the answer - "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." So, if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God - the Greek here is *pisteuo* (to trust, to have faith in, to have confidence in) - if you trust, have faith, have confidence that Jesus is the Son of God, you are promised fruit from the tree of life.



Anyone who heard this letter and knew the stories of Genesis would have been reminded of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. After they ate an apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God banished them so that they wouldn't eat from the Tree of Life (which would have given them eternal life). You see, Adam and Eve had disobeyed God and sinned. This created a separation, a gap, a chasm, between God and humans. A perfect, holy God couldn't be in the presence of sin. So he had to remove them from the Garden.

But the letter to the church at Ephesus reminded them, and reminds us, that eternal life with God is again possible because of Jesus. Jesus bridged that gap, that chasm, when he took on the sin of men so that ALL who believe (all who overcome) can spend eternity in heaven, the paradise of God.

## Application

So what can we glean from this passage? How can we use Jesus' words to the church at Ephesus in our own lives and in our own church? Just like the church at Ephesus, we can find ourselves in a rut. We can find ourselves going through the motions of being a Christ follower, without the love that should be at its very core, its very root.

If this is you (and I'm positive it has been at some point in time or another), then the letter to Ephesus contains a three step plan to get you back to where God wants you to be. To restore the love relationship that you had at first.

**REMEMBER** – The first thing that we need to do is remember. In our passage, Jesus says to the Ephesian church that they need to "Look how far [they] have fallen" when it comes to loving him and others. We could easily substitute the word "Remember" in there...remember how far you have fallen. In other words, remember where you were in your relationship with Christ and others when you first started out.

We need to think back and remember the excitement and passion that we had when we first decided to become a Christ follower. We watched a video with Perry Noble several weeks ago, and he talked about the defining moment that each of us have had if we are a Christ follower - that moment, that time, when we admitted that we are a sinner in need of a Savior and we asked Jesus to forgive us and change us and be Lord over our life. That's the moment when we were guaranteed to spend eternity in heaven with Jesus. And even if you can't remember the exact date that this happened, and I know I can't, you should at least remember the circumstances surrounding it or the place where it happened or the people you were with when you made your decision.



Similar to if you're married, you may not remember what time the ceremony started, but I bet you remember the location and the names of your bridal party and hopefully the date (although I know that is tricky for some people). And if you have kids, I'm sure you can remember where they were delivered. Moms can probably also remember how much they weighed and how long they were (I could probably get within 3 to 4 pounds and about 6 inches or so). And if you're not married and you don't have kids, then you can remember the name of the school when you went to kindergarten or the place you stayed on your favorite vacation.

My point is this – if you can remember details of these life events (and they are important, don't get me wrong), shouldn't you also be able to remember some of the details of the most important event in your life? The time when you decided to follow Jesus?

And not only should you be able to remember some of the details, but you should also be able to remember the emotion you had as you began your relationship with Him. I'm not a very emotional person (I've spoken about that before), but I still remember the excitement and love and thankfulness that I had when I realized that the God of the universe sent his Son to die for me so that I could spend eternity with him.

You should also remember how your life changed because of this excitement and love that you had found. There was likely a desire to be close to God – to get to know him more through reading the Bible and prayer and worship. There was likely a desire to share your faith with others, so that they too could know what it was like to be forgiven and accepted and loved. There was likely a desire to serve others and give generously, not because was required of you but because your heart had been changed to be more like the heart of God.

This is what we're called to remember – back before we spent five minutes reading our Bible so we could check it off our to do list. Back before our prayers were all about us and our wants, rather than about God and his wants for us. Back before we gave out of obligation and served out of guilt. Back before we had settled into all of our Christian routines. We need to remember back to the relationship and forget about the routines.

This concept is one that is often found in marriage counseling. Couples who have drifted apart (oftentimes due to the routines of life) are asked to remember back to what first attracted them to each other. To remember those feelings that they had when they were first dating or when they first got married. Because if they can remember back, then hopefully then can recapture those feelings of excitement and then build a renewed sense of love for one another. And that's what we're talking about here. A renewed sense of love for God and one another by remembering the love we had at first.



REPENT – After we remember, we need to repent. Jesus says in the passage, “Turn back to me...”. They were going in one direction, Jesus is telling them to go the other.

To really repent, we need to acknowledge that what we are doing isn't right. That we're not on the path that we're supposed to be on. That what we are doing or saying isn't measuring up. And this should come naturally during the remembering phase as we see how far we have fallen in our relationship with God, how much the relationship is broken and in need of repair. We realize that we don't have the same love for God and love for others that we had at first. And we realize that in order to be effective Christ-followers, we need to get this love back.

So we have to make the decision to do something different. To change direction. To repent. And this is easier said than done, which is why we can't do it with our own strength. We need to pray and ask God first for his forgiveness – forgiveness for putting other things in our lives before him. Forgiveness for just going through the motions of being a Christ follower. Forgiveness for not loving him the way that he deserves to be loved. Forgiveness for not loving others as He has instructed us to.

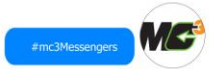
Fortunately, we serve a very forgiving God. 1 John 1:9 states, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us...”

Once we have asked for forgiveness, we next need ask God to help us recapture the love and joy and passion that we once had for him. To take us from our apathy to excitement! If we pray this with sincerity and if we have a true willingness to change, then we need to watch out! Because God will gladly answer this prayer. He desires nothing less than to have Christ followers who are totally committed – heart, mind, soul, strength. He longs to be in relationship with us.

This concept can be seen in a marriage when each spouse realizes that the relationship is broken and needs to be fixed. The love that was once a flame is now a flicker. After seeking forgiveness for letting the relationship get to that point, they need to commit to doing things differently. They need to repent – to resolve to take their marriage in an opposite direction.

RETURN – Lastly, we need to put our repenting into action and return to the works we did at first (verse 4). This doesn't mean that we are supposed to fill our lives with more church activities. Rather, it means that we are supposed to return to those things that were important to us when we first entered into a relationship with Jesus. Those foundations that helped us to build our relationship with him – things such as Bible study, prayer, fellowship with other believers.





This was actually the blue print of the early church. It's what we've modeled MC3 after because we believe that these are the areas that are key to maintaining a healthy relationship with God and with each other. In Acts 2:42, we see this written about the early church - "All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Bible Study), and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer."

You see, it's not just enough to say that we want to do things differently. Because if we don't put those words into action, then they're pretty hollow. If a husband and wife acknowledge that their marriage needs work and decide that changes need to be made to improve the health of their relationship, but then neither of them are willing to actually make a change, then it doesn't mean a whole lot. In fact, it really calls into question their commitment to the marriage.

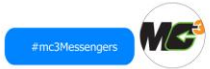
Same thing is true with our relationship with God. If we remember the love we once had for him and we decide that we need to repent, but we don't return to those things that we did at first, those relationship building activities, then it seems we don't really care as much about God as we say we do.

And don't be surprised if it all doesn't improve overnight. You didn't suddenly fall into a rut, and you won't suddenly get yourself out. But the key is to be making progress and to be focused on the goal of rekindling the relationship that you once had. And God knows that you'll slip and fall and backslide and so forth. It's called being human. But the important thing is to keep going. To keep returning. A wise person by the name of Chumbawamba once said, "I get knocked down, but I get up again." Same thing applies here. We have to get back up again and keep returning.

So what does this look like on a corporate level? What does it look like for MC3?

Over six years ago, many of us were in a bit of a rut in whatever local church we found ourselves. The excitement for God wasn't where we knew it should be. People were serving in various ministries out of obligation or expectation, not because they were so excited for God that they wanted to use their talents for him. People were going to worship every Sunday, putting in their time, because that was what they had always done on Sunday mornings. In other words, we were doing a lot of routine. Things had gotten a bit stale. A bit boring. For me, the relationship that I had with God wasn't the same relationship I had with God when it first began.

And then MC3 happened. All of a sudden, there was a renewed excitement. A belief that God was doing something amazing. And we were all challenged to get out of the rut of what church had looked like. To draw closer to God through prayer, and Bible study and worship. To draw closer to one another as we prepared to launch this new, crazy concept of doing church differently. In short, to go back to the basics found in Acts



and have a faith centered on a love for Jesus. Through this, I remembered back to the earlier days of my Christian walk and was filled with that excitement and passion that I hadn't experienced in quite some time. An excitement not only for a stronger relationship with Jesus, but an excitement to be in stronger relationships with others, with a church family.

And I think that's the way it was for a lot of us on the plant team and in those early days of MC3. We were starting a church because we believed that church should be centered around relationships and not routines. A relationship with God that was personal and exciting. A relationship with others that was authentic and grace-filled.

Fast forward six years. Do we, as MC3, still have that same level of passion for God that we had when we started? That's a tough question, because it requires us to be really honest with ourselves. And we may not like the answer.

I've come up with a series of questions to help us think about this a little further. And I'm going to do it in the style of one of my favorite comedians, Jeff Foxworthy. But instead of "You might be a redneck", I've changed it to "You might need a reset." In other words, you might need a reset in your relationship with God, OR we, as MC3, might need a reset in our relationship with God" if the following statements are true.

Here goes.

If you don't look forward to spending time with God in prayer and Bible study each day, you might need a reset.

If you think that worship is only something you do for 30 minutes on a Sunday morning, you might need a reset.

If you're not sharing God's message with people and inviting them to be a part of it, you might need a reset.

If you don't actively look for ways to help others or give to those in need, you might need a reset.

If you aren't connected in real relationships with the people in this room, you might need a reset.

If you are serving in your ministry position (band, Ignition, media team, welcome team) out of obligation, you might need a reset.



If you can't remember the last time you took a step of faith or did something crazy for God, you might need a reset.

As elders, one of our jobs is to keep our fingers on the pulse of MC3's spiritual health. And we continue to see people growing and maturing and becoming more like Jesus. In fact, at the beginning of every elder's meeting we have God moments where we share how God has been working in and through the people at MC3. And it's AMAZING to hear and share your stories. And those stories are only happening because your relationships with Jesus and each other are real and centered in love.

But we also see times where the excitement level, the commitment to Jesus, isn't up to par. Times when we, as a body, are just going through the motions of being at MC3. Just putting in our time. When our hearts aren't in it. As elders, we've all gone through those times personally and we've been able to confess that to each other and encourage each other. And just like we take time to celebrate the God stories of MC3 and thank God that we can be a part of them, we also take time to pray about the ruts at MC3 and ask God to help us remember and repent and return.

So if what you are doing at MC3 has become more about routines than about relationships, I encourage you to ask God to renew your excitement. To draw you closer to him. To get you back to the love you had at first.

Because we don't want to be a church like Ephesus. We don't want to be a church that only looks good on the outside, with our serving and our giving and our teaching. And those things are important. But we want to be a church that is known for what's on the inside – that when it comes to loving God and loving others we do it with a passion and excitement and intensity that can't be matched. Because that's what God says is important.

So, to wrap things up, and it goes back to our point - if you are bored, church, if you are bored, MC3, if you are in a rut, if you're in a routine, then God's challenge to you is this: love again! Love again! Return to the love you had at first.