

FIRST LOVE

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Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love...

This was Christ's admonishment to the church in Ephesus. They were a church who had been faithful to the work that they had been called to do. Ephesus was discerning in testing those who came as apostles and were not; they had labored and not fainted; yet, they were found wanting as they had abandoned their first love—that love for Christ which was the very motivation for all of the good works that were mentioned just prior to Christ's charge.

Some weeks ago, our dear friend and fellow sojourner Jackie Caporoso wrote an article entitled "Love and Marriage" in which she correctly identified that which is competing for our first love. That usurper is the law. Those of us who have been

raised in the Christian religion, regardless of brand or denomination, have been infected by the allure of the law in ways that we are not even conscious of. Jackie's article became like a grain of sand in the oyster for me as I recognized that I, just like the Ephesians, had lost sight of my first love. I realized, too, that I had not abandoned it so much for love of the law, at least as we usually understand the law. Instead, I had let this fervent love wane as I became increasingly overwhelmed with the cares of life. In a rather uncanny way, I had let these concerns become my first love as I attended more to them than I did to my love for Christ. Indeed, they became a law unto themselves.

As I pondered this, I realized that the church in Ephesus leaving their first love represents all of the distractions that would turn our hearts from that fervent love for our Lord that so burned within us when He graciously bonded Himself to us at the beginning. These distractions—whether they take the form of financial concerns, wayward children, disappointments in a marriage, challenges at work, or any other circumstantial cares in our lives at any given time—easily turn into a slave master as we become preoccupied with whatever demands they set before us. Do you recall those early days in your journey with the Lord—that which we call the “honeymoon period” in a human marital relationship? There was nothing that could distract you from that irresistible and magnetic gaze at His countenance. This was a love relationship that human love could only hope to imitate. None of the cares of life could turn our hearts away from the fervor of the love that we were experiencing for our Lord.

Then something happened. We were promoted in our work to a challenging job that demands our attention, even loyalty. We were recognized for our contributions to the church, the community or our workplace, and before you know it we found ourselves living for the accolades of those around us. Those who become heavily involved in church and related activities often find themselves defending a pet doctrine, and develop an inappropriate loyalty to “correct doctrine.” As the Lord brings us into new truths, these truths become precious to us, and they should. Too often, however, these precious truths become so stagnant and resistant to change over time that we are not open to anything fresh from our Lover, and we judge wrongly those who do not agree

with our doctrine. I know of one Bible teacher who proudly proclaims that he has not changed his position on any of his major beliefs over his many years of teaching ministry. Such a one has let his fervent love for Christ be overshadowed by a love for doctrine. This misplaced loyalty soon degenerates into a form of legalism that becomes a rigid task master. Misplaced loyalty to doctrine, to be sure, is the basis for the fracturing of Christ's body into over 40,000 Christian denominations throughout the world.

Another trap of distraction that causes many of us to lose our first Love are the crises in our lives that God is not responding to in exactly the way that we want. We received a scary diagnosis from the doctor. Our children rebelled. We lost our job. In the midst of these crises we cried out to the Lord. But he wasn't there in the way that we had experienced Him during that honeymoon period. It felt like He had abandoned us. We desperately searched for an answer. We read the Bible religiously. We attended conferences. We had ourselves prayed over. We engaged in all manner of strategies to try to recapture that first love that we once knew and was so precious to us. We don't realize it, but what we are doing is attempting to relive an *experience*. That first love that we knew back then is now but the memory of the *feelings* of closeness to our Lord. He spoke to us very clearly then. We want to hear His voice in the same way now. He flooded us with dreams and visions that we now desperately want to see again. We saw answers to prayers in miraculous ways and we seek to recapture the power of prayer that we experienced then. But God is dealing differently with us now. Our relationship with Him is taking on a greater maturity and He is now relating to us as SONS and not as children. This is a deeper knowing of Him than we were able to experience before. What we are experiencing as abandonment is actually Him bringing us into a more mature level of relationship that is based on trusting Him, rather than relying on an experience. That initial experience that we had with Him was a necessary one to bond our hearts to His. But He is so much more than that experience, and He now wants to bring us into a deeper level of relationship.

This is the relationship of sharing with Him in His sufferings. Our flesh resists this sort of experience, as we long for a revisit of that honeymoon that we knew early on. We are tempted to believe that our delightful "experience" of Him is how we

truly know Him. If we lack discernment in our understanding of where God is taking us, we might just abandon our quest to “know Him in the fellowship of His sufferings” (Philippians 3:10), and thereby lose our first love. We have mistakenly replaced an “experience” of Him for truly knowing Him. Yet it is in the sharing of His sufferings where we find a love relationship that is not based on feeling, circumstances, or what He can do for us, but one that endures and becomes even more glorious and precious through our suffering with Him. His promise is that if we will share in His sufferings, we will also share in His glory! Just imagine the implications of such an exchange! (Romans 8:17; 1 Peter 4:12-13)

The love for Him that we experienced before was real and it was genuine. But it was an immature love. Those whom He has called apart, He has called to participate with Him in the fellowship of His sufferings. We are called to be sons. The writer to the Hebrews states,

For it became him, for whom [are] all things, and by whom [are] all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings (Hebrews 2:10).

The Greek word for “sons” in this passage is *huios*, which in classical Greek refers specifically to mature sons—those who have been prepared to partner with the Father in his Kingdom agenda. The thought is analogous to a businessman whose son comes of the age of maturity to now become a partner in his father’s business. This is distinguished from the Greek word *teknion*, referring to immature children. And so it is through suffering and chastisement of various means that we are being brought into that position of sonship, *huios*. As we embrace the suffering as part of God’s doing in our lives, we acknowledge who He is as God and our love for Him becomes based on **who He is**, and no longer on what He can do for us, or the “feeling” of His presence that was such a part of our experience early in our sojourn with Him.

This mature love does not come about as a result of our simple willingness to do so, of course. While our cooperation is part of our maturing in our love for Christ, such love can only come about as a result of His divine working within us. Indeed, even our cooperation with Him in this process can only take place as a result of

the grace that He gives us to endure the cross which He has set before us. As we respond to our own individual Gethsemane, we will come to know that first love in a deeper way that we could ever have imagined.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REMEMBERING OUR FIRST LOVE

I find it curiously significant that the letter to the church in Ephesus, admonishing them for abandoning their first love, was the first of the seven letters to the churches. We must understand that the book of Revelation is a spiritual book, with rich symbolism representing spiritual realities. There were seven churches to whom John was to write, with a specific message to each church. Seven, of course, represents the number of completion and/or perfection throughout scripture. God created the world, and on the seventh day He rested. His creative work was completed. Understanding this symbolism, the seven churches in the book of Revelation might—and I believe should—be understood to represent the church in its entirety. Each of the letters addresses unique features of God's *ecclesia*, and are instructive for us who are part of this remnant of called out ones today.

The fact that the letter to Ephesus, with its admonishment to the believers in that city to return to their first love is the first letter, suggests to me that returning to that first love as our place of abode is critical to an overcoming lifestyle. Also, there are promises to each of these churches to those who overcome. The abandoning of their first love is the door to the problems identified in the letters written to the remaining six churches. And returning to their first love is, I believe, the prerequisite to overcoming. As we remember that these seven churches represent, in their totality, the body of Christ today, let us briefly consider some of the letters to the other churches.

Christ admonishes the church in Smyrna to remain faithful to the end. They will be tried, put in prison and possibly even put to death. That which the saints in Smyrna will be experiencing can only be met with the fervent love for Christ that drew them to Him in the first place. We will not overcome the tribulation before us by being fervently in love with a doctrine, or any prior experience of that love other than Christ Jesus Himself.

The church in Pergamum, while not denying their faith through testing, had in their midst those who held to “the doctrine of Balaam,” eating meat sacrificed to idols and committing fornication. While we know that Paul made it clear that we are free to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and that to the pure all things are pure, what is taking place here is an attempt to make themselves less conspicuous to the world around them. This was probably to avoid unwanted reprisal from a world hostile to the message of Christ. The doctrine of Balaam is a reference to the Old Testament prophet who compromised the Word of the Lord, even counseling Balak, an enemy of Israel, how to weaken Israel; suggesting that he lure Israelite men into having illicit sexual relations with Moabite women. Abandoning our first love leaves us vulnerable to all manner of compromise individually and corporately. We need only look at some of the compromises being made in organized Christianity today to see the dreadful consequences that result from abandoning that love. It is also worth mentioning that there were those in the church in Pergamum who held to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. This term derives from the Greek word *Nikolaos*, which is actually a compound Greek word formed of *nikos*, meaning “to conquer” and *laos* meaning “the people.” This is the Greek word from which we get the word “laity.” So what we see occurring in the church in Pergamum is the idea that there are some in their midst who would elevate themselves or others to a place of dominance or control over others. It is this very Nicolaitan spirit which permeates organized Christianity today expressed especially in the sharp distinction that we make between a clergy class and the laity. What we see in most churches today is reminiscent of the Israelites of old when, after seeing the power of God on Mount Sinai in thundering and lightning, they said to Moses, *“You speak to us and we will hear you, but don’t let God speak to us or we will die”* (Exodus 20: 19). We look to “professionals” to interpret the Word of God for us. Most people in churches across America put their confidence in a clergy class to interpret the Word of God for them rather than embark on the sometimes rather frightening but exciting journey of cultivating a relationship with the Holy Spirit and hearing God for themselves. Such a religious culture leaves people vulnerable to power hungry clergy and lay leaders alike.

The church in Thyatira, while being faithful in doing good works, tolerated “that woman Jezebel.” This, of course, has reference to the wife of King Ahab who was responsible for some of the most horrendous acts, including her attempt to exterminate the prophets of the Lord. She was a domineering woman who had her husband wrapped around her finger. Thyatira tolerated this spirit. There is the suggestion in this letter that this church, like Pergamum, was prone to compromise, this time in response to a controlling spirit. Such a spirit, I believe, is nurtured in a culture of Nicolaitonism. In such a religious culture, where hierarchal distinctions are made between clergy and laity, leaders and followers, there is birthed a spirit that wants to dominate. The greatest defense to such a spirit gaining a foothold among our members is to embrace Christ and Christ alone as we recapture our passionate love for Him.

The church in Laodicea, possibly more than any of the other churches mentioned in Revelation, captures the sad reality of the church today, at least in America and throughout most of the West. This was a lukewarm church—neither hot nor cold. This was a church that had become complacent in their riches. The glorified Christ is telling them, through the pen of John, that they have no idea how wretched and poverty stricken they really are. They are spiritually bankrupt. He urges them to buy gold tried in the fire that they may be truly rich. It is to the church in Laodicea that Christ says, “*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me*” (Revelation 3:19). To all who have grown lukewarm, Christ is saying, “*Invite **me** in. Leave your so-called riches in whatever form they may be, and return to **me**, your first love.*”

RETURNING TO OUR FIRST LOVE

The grievances that our Lord had toward the seven churches—and the grievances that He has toward His church today—derive ultimately from His people abandoning their first love. We have replaced our love for *Him* with a love for an experience. We have interpreted His silence as abandonment and as a result we have become discouraged substituting cheap imitations for truly knowing Him—

yes, specifically and especially knowing Him in the fellowship of His suffering. The result has been a lukewarm church; a timid church; a church vulnerable to compromise and to the dictates of Jezebel and Nicolaitan spirits that would seek to take advantage of this state of affairs to accomplish their own ungodly ends.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. Jesus Christ is waiting upon us to return to that fervent passionate love for Him that we once knew. This will not be the same infatuation that we knew in the beginning when He was engulfing us with His tender words and evoking within us feelings of lavish love for Him. He is bringing us through circumstances and trials that are testing us, clarifying for us where our true love lies. Are we truly in love with Him, or are we in love with what He can do for us? We must recognize that returning to our first love will not be all roses. There will be suffering. There will be circumstances that we do not understand. Our road to returning to our first love will involve embracing these afflictions and various trials as from Him, and learning to count them as all joy while we fill up in our body that which is lacking in His sufferings. As we do this, we will come to know Him in a deeper way than we could have ever known Him otherwise. His Word to me, as I was struggling with all of this sometime back was, *“There is no greater intimacy that you can have with me than sharing with me in my suffering.”* The form that our suffering will take will be different for each of us, as God ordains. Some will be called to experience rejection from others for stands that they have to take. Our Lord experienced the same rejection. Some will be mocked. Jesus was mocked. Some will be asked to sacrifice their very lives for Him. He was asked to sacrifice His life for us. The mature love for Him that we will come to know is grounded in a history of experiences of His faithfulness through all of these testings, much like the mature love that a husband and wife have for one another after enduring many years of trials and testings together. As we learn to embrace Him in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, we are on the road to returning to that first love. This will be a glorious day for the people of God, as the Kingdom of God is being formed afresh in His body.