

Losing Your First Love

One thing absent in a ship's compass can sink the whole ship. And in our Christian lives, one thing missing can mess it all up. If this one thing is missing from our service for God, the whole thing becomes invalid, it amounts to nothing. There is an example of this in the church at Ephesus:

I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

Revelation 2:2-5

The church's state

Jesus knows all about this church, like he knows all about you and me. He lists all the things He knows about this church. He says I know your business – your overall deeds. I know your labour. This means intense hard work that brings trouble and toil. I know you sweat it out, I know how frustrated you are sometimes.

I also know your patience and endurance. I know that you stick to the task, you are not swayed by the hardness of the work, you don't throw in the towel. I know your holiness – you have no time for sin. You don't tolerate sin in your midst – you cast it out. You're a pure church. You're a pure people.

I know you are sound in your doctrine. You test and examine people claiming to represent Me, and you find out who the phonies are – you expose the false teachers. I know you are discerning. I repeat, I know you have endurance. I know you keep on bearing up, you keep up the good work. I know you're dedicated to Me – you work for My sake, on account of Me, and you're not getting weary! You are not being selfish – you are working for Me.

Jesus says, I know and see all these things. Now, what could Jesus possibly find fault with in a church like this? I mean, if everyone was labouring to exhaustion, putting up with frustrations, sticking to the task, living holy lives, dedicated to doctrine, standing firm, devoting their lives to His name and not getting tired of it! This is a dream church, right? This sounds like the church we'd all long to be in, the state of perfection. But Jesus sees the world differently.

Christ's complaint

Christ says, I see all those things, and I'm aware of them, but I have a serious problem with you. To the other churches He says, there are some things about you I have a problem with, but to

this church, He bluntly says, I have one thing against you. I am in opposition to You. Why? Because, says Jesus, you have left your first love.

What does that mean? You have forsaken Me as the number one love in your life. You have deserted me for other things, and I am not pleased. This is the one thing that messes it all up. I know all the things you do, I know all that you do them in My name, but I see your heart, and you have left Your first love. The things you do, you do out of duty, not desire. You are labouring for me, but not loving me. You work for me, but you do not worship me.

The word 'left' is a deliberate word. You turned your back. Somewhere, somehow, your Christian life lost Me as the centre, and became a set of duties, a code of rituals, a number of habits tied together. And Jesus says, I am against You. I am no longer the priority of what you do, I am simply connected to it. I am no longer the passion in your life, I am just an obligation. I am no longer a treasure to you, I am no longer valuable to you, I am simply a burdensome duty.

Now we might step back, and think, Jesus will surely say, "Since you are such a good church on the whole, since you work so hard, since you are dedicated to Me, since you expose false doctrine and discipline sin, since you are so committed to Me, all I want you to do is add some love. You get 80% on your spiritual report card, now please improve the love aspect, and you will get 100%. If you add love, it will be the cherry on top. No, that's not what Jesus says. Notice:

Christ's caution

Jesus says, if you do not set this love issue right, if you do not fix up this problem, I am going to close your doors. If you don't set this in order, I am already on My way, and when I get there, I am going to remove your light to the world. Amazing! Jesus says that this one thing – you having left your first love – makes all the rest of the stuff meaningless!

That's incredible! It's like someone who scores 100% on a test, but forgets to write their name on the paper. It's all worthless, all invalid. Jesus counts your labouring for Him, your endurance, your discernment, your consecrated lifestyle, your dedication to Him – as all invalid, if inside it, there is no love for Him. Instead of scoring you high, and asking you to improve, He fails you completely if you do not include this element.

Jesus wasn't making idle threats to the church at Ephesus. They do not exist today. He was true to His Word. And He included this chapter as a warning to all of us. It can happen to us too. We can be indicted by the Lord as a busy people, as a devoted people, but as a cold people with no love for Him. And He will remove our candlestick too.

Why? Why does He take this so seriously? Why remove an otherwise perfect church for a lack of love? Isn't that overkill? Would you wipe out a productive, holy church because they didn't have love? Why does God regard this as crucial, as essential?

The reason is this: God is most glorified in His people when His people love Him. God's purpose is to glorify Himself. **Isaiah 43:7** tells us we were created for His glory. In Heaven they cry out that we were created for His pleasure. It's our purpose. And that purpose of glorifying God is most met when we love Him.

Let's think of it on an everyday level. When a man enjoys his new car, he praises it to others. Because he loves it, everything he says reflects that – he glorifies it, doesn't he? When he shines it, when he gets in it even to drive 100 meters to the shop – he exalts the car as valuable, and worthy in his eyes, doesn't he? His love for it glorifies it.

In our lives, the things we love, we glorify them by our love for them. Whether it be a place, a hobby, a sport, an interest, a kind of food, a possession, a shoe – we glorify them by how much we talk about them, by the joy we show when we are in contact with it. By showing how much it satisfies us, we show how valuable the thing is.

Now isn't it strange, that when it comes to God, we don't think this way. Suddenly, we think love can no longer mean enjoying, desiring, being satisfied – it suddenly becomes something else. When we speak of loving chocolate or coffee, and our faces light up, when we speak of loving God, our faces get all serious and frozen. But in fact, loving God in this sort of way is what glorifies Him.

We may think, 'No, love for God must be filled with duty, devotion, hard work, and dedication. We don't need desire, that's inappropriate.' But just duty is what this church at Ephesus had, and Jesus threw it out. It's not that duty is a bad thing,. It's a good thing, but duty with no love, no desire, is bad. If you have duty with no desire, you tear the heart out of it, and you remove all the glory.

John Piper illustrates this with a man who surprises his wife with flowers on their anniversary. Her face lights up with joy, but he quickly holds up his hand and say, "Now, honey I want you to know why I did this. Since my love for you is so unselfish, I gained no pleasure out of buying you flowers the way I get pleasure out of eating chocolate. No, I bought these flowers because it is my duty. I am a devoted husband, and in my dedication to you, I bought these flowers."

Well, her smile will fade, won't it? Why? Because if he did only what he did for duty's sake, she is not honoured. It means she was not great enough to motivate his gift, only his own sense of duty. But if he appears at that door and says, "Nothing would give me more pleasure than to give you these, and spend this special night with you," then what has happened? He has glorified her! He has shown by his desire for her, by his joy in her, how valuable she is – how awesome she is to him. He has glorified her by loving her.

This is why God will throw out duty with no desire. If you do not have that desire, that passion, that enjoyment of God, you do not glorify Him. If you serve with no love – do you know what you say about God? You say, God needs me. God is someone you feel obliged to help, and by saying that, you are lowering Him. By doing things for God reluctantly, with no joy, you are making Him less than yourself, and you do not glorify God.

You are really saying, 'It's not me who is benefiting out of this relationship – it's God, and so you make yourself better than God. It dishonours Him. If you come to your quiet time every day and drag your feet, feeling that you are kindly offering God some of your time, you are exalting yourself above God. You are saying He needed your time, and you are meeting His needs. But it's the other way around. Fellowshiping with God is God meeting our needs, and us needing His time.

The big thing we need to understand is that God does not have needs. When God says, 'Love Me,' He does not mean, meet my need of love. He does not mean, comfort Me, make Me feel better about Myself. He does not mean serve Me, because I can't do it myself. No, He is so complete, He has no needs. He is so awesome that He was perfectly joyful before He created the universe. His name means I AM – He is, He is Perfect, and your or my love does not complete Him. Our service for Him does not help Him.

Loving God means desiring Him, and being satisfied in Him! To love God does not mean you meet His needs, it means He meets yours! Loving God means you find in God your absolute fulfilment, your highest joys, the greatest satisfaction possible. When a human tastes and sees that God is the highest joy of all – then God is most glorified! '

Just as your love for an earthly thing causes you to glorify it in your actions and attitudes, so your desire and love for God will cause you to glorify Him in your actions and attitudes. That is exactly why Jesus is willing to throw the whole thing out if you do not have love. If you are not enjoying God in what you are doing, you are not glorifying Him.

See, if you come to prayer and you think, 'What a burden,' you do not glorify God. You say with your attitude that God is not worth speaking to. If you open your Bible with a heavy heart, you do not glorify God – you state that He is not worth listening to. If you go to church with reluctance and boredom, you state that God is not worthy of your time and attention.

When Christians live their lives like the Ephesian church – with all duty, and no desire – God is not glorified, because the onlooking world sees our faces and says, 'God is not great enough to satisfy them.' See, all of us have a first love. Jesus says we have left Him as our first love – but we all have something in our lives that is the top thing that we look to for joy, meaning, purpose, happiness. And our enthusiasm, or joy, our excitement over that thing, person, place – glorifies it.

God rejects you bringing him sacrifices with no heart, because then you make him like that wife whom the husband could only serve out of duty. It means He is not great enough in Himself to motivate you, and you respond only to your sense of duty. All the hard work of the Ephesian church did not glorify God, because it did not show how worthy He was, it did not lift Him up as a satisfying God, as the fulfilment of every desire.

And if you are not glorifying Him, the whole thing is pointless. That's Jesus is willing to throw out the entire Ephesian church – because He doesn't need any of the stuff they are doing. It's great, but He can do it Himself, He could get others to do it.

Consider that this is Paul's point in **1 Corinthians 13**, where in the context of spiritual gifts, discussing service for God – he says that if you do mighty things for God, but it lacks love, it is empty. Faith to move mountains, giving all to the poor, even being a martyr, says Paul, is worthless and useless, if it does not have love as its heartbeat.

We are not advocating the sentimentalism that is so rampant today, the experience-based emotionalism. But we are also not advocating the opposite extreme – duty that dispenses with desire. Duty with no desire magnifies us as God's benefactors, instead of seeing it in the opposite, God-glorifying way. We are not doing God a favour by serving Him, God is doing us a favour by letting us experience Him in serving Him.

God could do all that you could accomplish in a lifetime by speaking one word. God could raise up stones to do exactly what you do. God doesn't need workers. I love the humour in God's voice in **Psalms 50:12**, *"If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is Mine, and the fulness thereof."*

Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.

Acts 17:25

It's sad that we have glamourised this in the church today. We say, "I serve, even though I don't feel like it!" – like that makes you noble. It doesn't – it states that God is not great enough to make you want to serve Him. "I worked hard for God, even though I couldn't stand the work" – that's not impressive – it shows God's commands are grievous, it means His yoke is hard, and His burden is heavy.

If you serve out of duty, no desire, no love, and feel noble and pat yourself on the back, and think, "God is better off today because of me" then you exalt yourself, you do not glorify God. If you love serving Him, then you say, God is good, I am better off today than I was yesterday.

Am I saying we must always feel happy, or joyful? No, but I am saying that even when you feel frustrated, tired, or even unhappy, you can say – but God is great! He is worth it! God is awesome, and I want to continue. I love God, and that greater joy pushed me through these moments. That glorifies Him.

God does not need workers. He wants worshippers. Worshippers will be workers, but workers are not always worshippers. God wants people who show how valuable He is, how satisfying He is, how wonderful He is, with their service. Worship is simply responding to God. It is your life's statement of how much you think God is worth.

Worship is not singing some songs on Sunday – it is what your life says about God at all times. It is your continual statement to everyone about how valuable God is to you. Responding to God is what gives all of our service meaning – it is the first love that Jesus accepts. That's what worship is – worth-ship. Well, it's obvious now why Jesus wants our hearts. It makes sense why He will not accept duty without desire, because it doesn't glorify Him. So what is His counsel?

Christ's counsel

Jesus offers three very simple points: you need to remember, you need to repent, you need to redo. One could easily say. 'Ok, well I don't feel like going to church and I mustn't go out of duty, so I won't go at all!' No, that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says, when that happens – remember how it first was – how you couldn't wait to go to church, how you longed for Sunday.

Compare that with your heart now. And then repent that you should be so cold toward going to God's house, while happier to go to a restaurant. That's a travesty – that God is so little in my eyes! I must repent of it. Then I must repeat. Repeat what? The first works – the priority works. What's that?.

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

Mark 12:13

So I focus myself on going to church to desire God, to feast on Him, to serve and honour Him – not because He needs it, but because He is so worthy. If I find myself going to my Bible out of cold duty, I do not avoid reading it, but I must repent of a heart that thinks so little of God as to be reluctant to read about Him. I must remember how hungry I was for Him when I first met Him, repent of this coldness, and go to Him pleading that He fellowship with me like we used to.

If I find myself serving with nothing but duty, I do not stop doing what I am doing, but I must see what a great sin it is to feel only a sense of burden when serving the King. I must remember what a delight it was to do anything for Him at first, and repent of my cold heart, and repeat those days of serving Him because I wanted more of Him.

We must get in the Word and taste and see that the Lord is good. The Bible is the only place that will enlarge our appreciation for the treasure of God. If your love for God is missing, He will throw it out. Your love for Him is not meeting His needs, it is desiring Him above all else.

If you will not be satisfied in God, God will not be satisfied with you. When you show how all-satisfying God is – you glorify Him, and He is pleased. That's making Him your first love. Christ is in the middle of the candlesticks. He must be the centre of all that we do.