

Regaining Our First Love
Revelation 2:1-7
July 12, 2020
Newton Bible Church

P. G. Wodehouse, in *Reader's Digest* told about a member of the British Parliament who was once standing in the lobby of the House when a tall, distinguished looking old gentleman came up and begged for a moment of his time. He had a sad story to tell.

By hard work and thrift, he had amassed a large fortune, and now his relatives had robbed him of it and, not content with that, had placed him in a mental home. This was his day out. "I have put the facts down in this document," he concluded. "Study it and communicate with me at your leisure. Thank you, sir, thank you. Good day."

Much moved by the man's exquisite courtesy, the Member of Parliament took the paper, shook hands, promised that he would do everything in his power and turned to go back to the debate. As he did so, he received a kick in the seat of the pants that nearly sent his spine shooting through his hat.

"Don't forget!" said the old gentleman.

There are matters in life that are important not to forget. As we return to Christ's letter to the Ephesian church this morning, we need to do some review. First, let's remind ourselves of Christ's ministry in His church:

Revelation 1:9-20 (ESV)

⁹I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

John recorded Christ's active ministry in His church. John's account revealed:

- The Messiah is actively involved in the current activity of His church.
- His clothing reveals His priestly ministry, including intercession, to the church.

- His blazing white hair reveals His eternal holiness and infinite wisdom.
- His laser like eyes penetrate to perceive accurately what is transpiring in His church.
- His glowing feet reveal that He is exercising His chastening authority in His church.
- His roaring voice reveals that He is speaking to His church through His Word and Spirit.
- His holding the seven stars reveals that He exercises leadership in His church.
- His two-edged sword reveals both His protection and ability to judge.
- His brilliant shining face reveals His eternal glory that is reflected in His church.

We ought to fall on our faces like John did and worship our glorious Lord. But we must hasten on to remember the danger that had overtaken this commendable church. That is found in the letter He sent to them:

Revelation 2:1-7 (ESV)

2 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

This remarkable church, with its dramatic beginning and development, including being led by the finest leaders of that generation (including two apostles), was as close to the model church as could be.

Christ Himself commended them for:

- Their work to the point of exhaustion.
- Their patient endurance; courageously expressed under difficult circumstances.
- Their intolerance of sin and those who are evil.
- Their spiritual discernment which correctly sniffed out and rejected false doctrine and teachers.
- Their motivation of doing all of this for the right reason, for His name's sake.
- Their hatred of what He hated – specifically the aberrant works of the Nicolaitans.

From all outward appearances there were no flaws in this commendable church. Christ's laser vision, however, had detected a flaw that would be fatal if left untended.

- Christ confronted them with the painful truth that they had abandoned the love they had at first.
- We would try to let them (and ourselves) off the hook by saying that they had just lost their fervor. While that is true, Christ's diagnosis is specific. The word He used can refer only to abandonment.
- This matter is so serious that Christ warned them that if they did not follow His prescription for regaining their first love, He would personally put them out of business.

- This church apparently failed to follow the prescription because where it once stood only ruins remain. This cannot be because the prescription is inadequate; it must be because it was not followed as prescribed.
- We referenced that prescription last week and promised that we would give it fuller consideration today. That is where we now turn.

There are three imperatives given in this prescription given in a specific order. Let's consider them now and see why they must be followed exactly as prescribed:

1. Remember! ("remember therefore from where you have fallen")
 - In order to obey this command, one must:
 - a. Remember your desperate situation before you were saved.
 - Paul summarized this well in his letter to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 2:11-13 (ESV)

¹¹Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹²remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

- Paul described their condition before being saved as one of utter hopelessness and despair. He reminded them:
 - Before God saved them, they were separate from Christ. Until exposed to the Gospel, the Ephesians had no idea how to have their sins forgiven and be reconciled to God. They were separate from Christ with no way of knowing Him. We may have grown up in Christian homes and heard about Christ our entire lives. Until God saved us, we were just as separated from Christ as were those pagan Ephesians – that is a terrifying place to be!
 - Before God saved them, they were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel. They had been excluded from the people God had chosen as His own. If you've ever traveled in a foreign country, you have undoubtedly felt a bit excluded. On a much larger scale, before we were saved, we were excluded from God's people.
 - Before God saved them, they were strangers to the covenants of promise. The Greek text has the definite article before "promise." The promise refers to the underlying promise of all the covenants God made through the ages, to send a Savior. They had no clue of how they might be saved because they had no understanding of their need of and God's promise of a Savior. Neither did we!
 - Before God saved them, they had no hope. Without God's promises, there is no hope! His promise to send the Messiah was "the hope of Israel" and our only hope as well. Removing God's promises from the picture creates hopelessness. And it gets worse!
 - Before God saved them, they were without God in the world. These may be the saddest words in the Bible: "having no hope and without God in the world." Even if you live a relatively comfortable life, to face life's trials without God and without the hope of eternal life is a terrible thing! That's where we were!

- Paul wanted them (and us) to remember these things so that we would never forget where we were before Christ snatched us from the pit we were in because of our sins. Which leads us to:
- b. Remember the love for Christ you had at first.
 - Paul reminded them in verse 13 that they who had been far off had been brought near by the blood of Christ.
 - He began that verse with the glorious words “But now!” Where we had been separated from Christ, excluded from the people of God, strangers to His promises, with no hope and without God Himself, there was a complete change.
 - We were separate from Christ but found ourselves gloriously linked to Him – literally in Christ!
 - We had been separated from God but found ourselves in close communion with Him in Christ. “Brought near” is a passive verb, meaning that Christ acted upon us to bring us near, something we knew we could never do ourselves.
 - Knowing all that He had done for us and in us caused a flood of love toward Him to fill our hearts and mind.
 - This is why Christ instructed the Ephesians to remember from where they had fallen.
 - He wanted them to remember the joy they had experienced in knowing they were forgiven, the exhilaration they had experienced in their relationship with Him and the overwhelming peace they had experienced.
 - Spurgeon summed it up well; “Remember, then, what your first love was, and compare your present condition with it. At first nothing diverted you from your Lord. He was your life, your love, your joy. Now you look for recreation somewhere else, and other charms and other beauties win your heart. Are you not ashamed of this? Once you were never wearied with hearing of Him and serving Him. Never were you overdone with Christ and His gospel, many sermons, many prayer meetings, many Bible readings, and yet none too many. Now sermons are long, services are dull, and you must have your jaded appetite excited with novelties. How is this? Once you were never displeased with Jesus whatever He did with you. If you had been sick, or poor, or dying, you would still have loved and blessed His name for all things. He remembers this fondness and regrets its departure.”
 - Remembering the love you had at first will cause you to realize the need for the second imperative in Christ’s prescription.
- 2. Repent! (commanded in the middle of verse 5 and again at the end of the verse)
 - In order to obey this command, one must:
 - a. Repent of abandoning your first love.
 - Repent is the Greek word metanoew, which means “to change one’s mind.”
 - This first of all involves acknowledging one’s sin. It is to agree with Christ that you have abandoned that first love and placed higher affections on things other than Him.
 - This also implies a fundamental change of attitude toward sin and a purpose to turn away from it. This is not possible if it is not directly connected to confession of sin

and trusting God to be faithful to His promise to forgive that sin and to cleanse from all unrighteousness.

- Biblical repentance is not a mere change of thinking, nor is it merely shame or sorrow for sin. True Biblical repentance is also a redirection of the human will, involving the mind, the heart, and the will.
 - Intellectually, repentance begins with a recognition of sin. Emotionally, genuine repentance is marked by a sincere sorrow, remorse, and even mourning over one's sin. Thus, true repentance always includes at least some element of contrition – not sorrow for getting caught, nor sadness because of the consequences, but a spirit broken by the sense of having sinned against God and a longing to be restored to fellowship with Him.
- Spurgeon summed this up: “Repent as you did at first. The word so suitable to sinners is suitable to you, for you have grievously sinned. Repent of the wrong you have done your Lord by leaving your first love of Him. Could you have lived a seraphic life, only breathing His love, only existing for Him, you had done little enough, but to quit your first love, how grievously have you wronged Him! That love was well deserved, was it not? Why, then, have you left it? Is Jesus less fair than He was? Does He love you less than He did? Has He been less kind and tender to you than He used to be? Say, have you outgrown Him? Can you do without Him? Have you a hope of salvation apart from Him? I charge you, repent of this your ill-doing towards one who has a greater claim upon your love than ever He had. He ought to be today loved more than you did love Him at your very best! O my heart, is not all this most surely true? How ill are you behaving! What an ingrate are you! Repent! Repent!”
- b. Repent of serving mechanically
- Christ's commendations to this church recognized their hard work and that they meant this hard work to honor Him. It failed to do so because it had become routine and mechanical. That which should have been borne on the arms of love instead plodded along on the back of duty. The very thing they thought should accrue credit to their account was proof positive that they had abandoned their first love!
 - The signs of serving mechanically include:
 - Coldness invading our service to one another or our times of personal devotions.
 - Worship becoming routine as we go through the motions.
 - Service being driven by a sense of responsibility and duty rather than the joy of serving together with our Savior.
 - Service being driven by what we think others expect of us and hoping they will think well of us
 - Once again, Spurgeon summed it up well; “Repent of much good that you have left undone through lack of love. Oh, if you had always loved your Lord at your best, what might you not have known of Him by this time! What good deeds you might have done by force of His love! How many hearts might you have won for your Lord if your own heart had been fuller of love, if your own soul had been more on fire! You have lived a poor beggarly life because you have allowed such poverty of love. Repent! Repent!”

- Burk Parsons reminds us: “First and foremost, repentance is a gift. It is an act that the Holy Spirit works in us resulting in an act that flows out of us. Although it is our act, it does not originate from within us. In fact, in our naturally stubborn, rebellious hearts the whole notion of repentance is foreign. Just as our righteousness is a foreign, or “alien,” righteousness from Christ, so is our repentance. It is granted to us by God Himself.”
 - If we are to repent of abandoning our first love and of serving mechanically, we must ask for this gift. Fortunately, it is a gift God delights in lavishing upon His children. Unless we repent, we will not be able to obey the third imperative in Christ’s prescription:
3. Repeat! (“do the works you did at first”)
- This was not a call to more Christian service or activity – the Ephesians already had plenty of that! “First” is “protos” which means first in time, place, or rank. This clearly looks back to the beginning of a Christian’s life. One could say that this imperative is a command to do the things you did at first in the way you did them then. Repentance must precede; if not, you will just continue going through the motions! When repentance has taken place, to obey this command, one must:
 - a. Repeat your acts of devotion.
 - When you first met Christ, His Word became a love letter to you that you read as an act of devotion to Him. Go back, read it again focusing upon how His great love motivated the sacrifice that made it possible for you to come to Him. Let His love overwhelm you and let His Spirit redirect His love through you that you might love Him more.
 - When you first met Christ, prayer was an expression of love to Him for all that He is and does. You wanted to talk to Him about everything before you wanted to talk to others. Go back to that devotion to Him. Be quick to tell Him what you are feeling. Be eager to let Him know that you love Him.
 - Spurgeon had this to add: The prescription is complete, because the doing of the first works is meant to include the feeling of the first feelings, the sighing of the first sighs, the enjoying of the first joys, these are all supposed to accompany returning obedience and activity. We are to get back to these first works at once. Most men come to Christ with a leap, and I have observed that many who come back to Him usually do so at a bound. The slow revival of one’s love is almost an impossibility, as well expect the dead to rise by degrees. Love to Christ is often love at first sight, we see Him, and are conquered by Him. If we grow cold, the best thing we can do is to fasten our eyes on Him till we cry, “My soul melted while my Beloved spoke.”
 - b. Repeat your acts of service.
 - When you first met Christ, it was a delight to gather with other believers for fellowship and worship. It was anything but routine, and you believed God’s Word that declared that worship in all of life was your reasonable service.
 - Serving others within the church family was a privilege you looked forward to and jealously guarded. You experienced much more joy in serving than in being served but also humbly recognized that denying others the privilege of serving you was robbing them of joy.
 - These first acts of service to God and others include:
 - Intercessory prayer

- Bible Study – both as a student and as a teacher
 - Meditation on God’s Word to allow His Spirit to shape your thinking
 - Fellowship with other believers
 - Serving the poor and needy
 - Sharing the good news of the Gospel
- MacArthur summarizes: “You see people who come to Christ, fall in love with Christ, as it were, and they want to serve, and they want to tell their friends. They want to teach, they want to pass on what they know. They want to sing. They want to pray. Those are the first things. Go back. If you once taught but you don’t teach, if you once prayed with folks but you don’t pray, if you always used to come on Sunday nights and now you come very rarely, if you always went to Bible study and were part of a fellowship group, and you went to every opportunity to be trained, but you don’t do that anymore, that’s evidence of the loss of first love. That’s a sin. Remember how it was, repent before God, and repeat the things you used to do.”

That’s the prescription and it must be followed exactly as given. If you are a child of God, He will graciously help you apply the prescription to your own life. In a few moments we will be gathered around the Lord’s Table – a Table he has designed to help us follow His prescription; remember, repent, repeat. This is a prescription which never expires and may be used as needed.

The Puritan preacher, Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) wrote to his son, When I was threatening to become cold in my ministry, and when I felt Sabbath morning coming and my heart not filled with amazement at the grace of God, or when I was making ready to dispense the Lord’s Supper, do you know what I used to do? I used to take a turn up and down among the sins of my past life, and I always came down again with a broken and a contrite heart, ready to preach, as it was preached in the beginning, the forgiveness of sins. I do not think I ever went up the pulpit stair that I did not stop for a moment at the foot of it and take a turn up and down among the sins of my past years. I do not think that I ever planned a sermon that I did not take a turn around my study table and look back at the sins of my youth and all my life down to the present; and many a Sabbath morning, when my soul had been cold and dry, for the lack of prayer during the week, a turn up and down in my past life before I went into the pulpit always broke my hard heart and made me close with the gospel for my own soul before I began to preach.

Abandoning our first love is a dangerous proposition. But the One whom we ought to love with purest love has given us a means to regain that first love. May we, in His strength, avail ourselves of His prescription and love again as we did at first!