

August 13
YOUR FIRST LOVE, Part One

*“I have something against you
because you have forsaken your first love.”*
Jesus, to the Pastor in Ephesus, in Revelation 2:4

When we start our journey with Jesus, we look at all others in the kingdom of God as better and wiser than ourselves. We look up to everybody who has been in Christ before us, and we are willing to receive from them the counsel they can give. Just coming out of the darkness of sin, we are acutely aware of the fact that we know nothing, and that we need the help and guidance of others who escaped sin and came to the Lord before us.

Then, as time passes and we pursue the righteousness of God, we grow in His knowledge. And growing in His knowledge, it must happen that we begin to notice faults among the saints we formerly held on a pedestal. In the beginning, this can be a troubling experience, and often the young ones in Christ condemn themselves and think they are feeling evil things when their spirits begin to discern errors where they saw none before. They tell themselves they shouldn't think such thoughts about others in Christ, when the Spirit of God begins to show them things they have not seen about members of the body.

This growth in the Spirit can be a most difficult time in a young believers's life, akin to the “awkward age” of human teen-age years, when children begin to have to deal with adult matters without having the benefit of adult experience and knowledge. Nevertheless, for those who sincerely pursue the righteousness of God after they are converted, this trial of one's heart is an unavoidable reality.

What I discovered when I went through this trial as a young believer surprised me. While I was in sin, when I discovered someone was not what I thought he should be, I would turn against him. The truth about him affected my attitude toward him; it affected my feelings, and I could not feel the affection for him that I previously felt. But in Christ, what I was pleasantly surprised to learn is that a brother or sister's errors did not affect the love I had for them at all. The love remained, even after I saw their fault. I found that, in my heart, they were still on a pedestal because they belonged to God, because He had loved them and sanctified them. Nothing they did caused me to love them less.

In Revelation 2, Jesus was somewhat displeased with the otherwise wonderful pastor in Ephesus because the doctrine of certain men who claimed to be sent by God had caused that pastor to lose his first love for them. This pastor was wise, patient, devoted to Christ, and hard-working, but the loss of his first love was such a danger to the well-being of the body of Christ in Ephesus that Jesus threatened to take the congregation away from him if he didn't regain that lost love.

We must hold on to our first love when we see faults in one another, and we will retain our first love of the brethren if we stay filled with the Spirit, “for the love of God is spread abroad in our hearts by the holy Spirit that He has given us” (Rom. 5:5). God loves all His children, even the bad ones. And if we, in our hearts, leave no door open for them to repent, we are not like our heavenly Father, and we cannot be useful to Him in restoring lost sheep to the fold. Suppose those false apostles in Ephesus were to repent, and were forgiven by Christ, but then, the pastor could not minister to them because he had no more love or respect for them? He would be of no more use to the saints because the love of God could not flow from Christ through him to them. That is why Jesus commanded this good man to repent, and threatened to take the congregation away from him if he didn't.

Next Time: Your First Love, part two

August 14
YOUR FIRST LOVE, Part Two

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because you have forsaken your first love.”*
Jesus, to the Pastor in Ephesus, in Revelation 2:4

In Part One, we described in general what is involved in what Jesus called a believer’s “first love”. Now, I want to point out one element of that “first love”; namely, the willingness, even eagerness, to receive correction. Since, in the beginning of a believer’s walk, he considers everyone in the body of Christ to be better than himself, he is willing to receive guidance and correction from everyone in the body. But what about after he grows in the knowledge of God and he begins to see faults among fellow saints? If he retains his “first love”, he will still be able to receive instruction and correction even from those in whom he sees faults, and even from those who have wandered away from righteousness if God chooses to use them to correct him.

“The Lord tries the righteous,” and one of the trials which the Lord prepares for all of us, at one time or another, is to use wayward saints to send us a reproof or to point out a fault in ourselves. But if we have lost our “first love” for those who have gone astray, we will be too proud to listen to those in whom we see fault, even if our heavenly Father is using them to speak to us. God does do this, and He does it often, to see if we have become puffed up against fellow believers who are weaker than we, or less knowledgeable than we, or who have fallen away from righteousness altogether.

God used a donkey to reprove one of His prophets (Num. 22:28), and He used a rooster to reprove Peter when Peter cursed and swore that he did not know Jesus (Mt. 26:75). God will put it on a small child’s heart to make a comment that can convict a parent – that that parent’s first love is still in his heart. God will even use a sinner to point out a fault in one of His saints, to try the heart of that saint to see if it has lost its “first love”. God will use the worst of men to try the hearts of the best of men.

Solomon made this arresting statement: “*The spirit of man is the candle of the LORD*” (Prov. 20:27). We all know that the spirit of man is blind and foolish and completely void of the knowledge of God. How, then, could the spirit of man be “the candle of the LORD” except that the Lord sometimes chooses to use blind and foolish men to send us a message that we need to hear?

MY TESTIMONY

Over the years, there have been brothers and sisters in the Lord who have fallen away from righteousness and then made cruel and false accusations against me. Some of you, no doubt, have experienced that kind of persecution. I would not do the things I have been accused of doing even if someone threatened me and told me I had to do them. It has been with me as David once said: “*False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not*” (Ps. 35:11). And yet, on one occasion, amid a letter filled with hurtful, false accusations, there was one criticism that I felt the Spirit wanted me to pray about. I did, and I benefitted from it. What difference did it make if the criticism that I needed to hear was surrounded by cruel and baseless slander? If it was something Jesus wanted me to pay attention to, then that is all that mattered. And if in that instance, the Lord chose to try my heart by using a terribly backslidden brother, then wouldn’t I be foolish to reject that message because the vessel whom God used is “a vessel of dishonor”?

One’s “first love” is, first and foremost, a love for God. And as long as that “first love” remains in our hearts, we will receive anything that is of God, regardless of how it comes to us. A person who still has his “first love” will receive a message from God even if He chooses to send it by the hand of the devil. Paul did (2Cor. 12:7). The only thing that matters is that it is of God, and we are His servants.

BOTH WAYS

The opposite may also be true. God may try our hearts by sending us something wrong through an otherwise righteous person, if our “first love” of God and the things that be of Him is alive in our hearts, we will reject the wrong, even though we still love and respect the person who brought it. The love of God, our “first love”, gives us the power both to reject error, regardless of who it comes through, and to receive truth, whoever it comes through. Jesus rejected Satan when he lied to him in the Temptation, and he rejected one of his most beloved disciples when Peter ignorantly opposed God’s will for His Son (Mt. 16:21-23).

Paul rebuked a wicked man named Elymas on the island of Cyprus when Elymas spoke evil of the gospel (Acts 13:11), but he also rebuked the righteous apostle Peter when he played the hypocrite before Gentiles in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). It was God who put Paul in the position of seeing Peter fall short of God’s righteousness, to see if Paul was a “respector of persons” and would not speak up when the man of God was about to harm some of God’s children with hypocrisy. Moses received holy counsel from God, but he also humbled himself to receive counsel from the uncircumcised Jethro (Ex. 18:14-24). It was God who sent Jethro with that good advice to Moses, to try Moses’ heart, to see if Moses had become too proud to receive advice from someone who did not know God as well as Moses did.

Pray that God keeps your “first love” alive in your heart because without it, men often find themselves condemning what is right and justifying things that are wrong for no other reason than dislike of the vessel whom God chooses to use.

A heart in which one’s “first love” is still living recognizes what is true, and it recognizes what is false, no matter who speaks it. Once in ancient Israel, a prophet told a man to strike him in the face. That man refused to hit God’s prophet. He would have justified his disobedience with Scriptures such as, “*Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.*” But he paid for his foolishness with his life (1Kgs. 20:35-36). When the prophet found another man and commanded him to strike him, that man’s “first love” was alive and well, and he struck the prophet so hard that he wounded him (1Kgs. 20:37). That man, even though he had struck one of God’s holy prophets, went away blessed. He had disobeyed a Scripture, but he had obeyed God.

On another occasion, late in Israel’s history, Jeremiah summoned a group of righteous men, “the sons of Rechab”, into the temple of the Lord and placed before them cups of wine. Then Jeremiah, following God’s orders, commanding those Rechabites to drink the wine, but they refused because they were under an oath not to do so. With them, God was well pleased, and He promised them one of the greatest blessings that Old Testament people could receive (Jeremiah 35). It was a blessing like “the sure mercies of David”, which was a promise from God that their seed would never perish from the earth. I am certain that to this day, known but to God, the line of the “sons of Rechab” still exists.

For God’s people, there are few things so precious as their “first love”. It keeps our hearts open to God and closed to evil. If our “first love” is alive and well in our hearts, God can speak to us through anything in Creation. If there is any person, anywhere, in any spiritual condition, through whom God cannot speak to you, it is only because you have lost some of your “first love” and pride has taken root. If there is anything in God’s Creation that He cannot use to speak to you, it can only be that you are lacking in that precious “first love” that keeps our hearts open to God. Would you listen to a donkey or a rooster if God chose to speak to you through one of them? Would you listen to what a fool had to say to you if God chose to use that fool to tell you something? We are made of dust, and whatever more than dust that we have become is a gift of God. That is why pride is such a dangerous enemy and our “first love” is so precious.