

Churches Which Leave Their First Love

“I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Revelation 2:5)

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Introduction

The theme of this lectureship is one of vital importance. Throughout the Bible we find various exhortations connected with the word “except.” This small five-letter word carries a strong meaning. Thayer’s Greek word studies defines this word to mean “if not, unless.” It carries the idea of “in no other way” or “based upon a certain condition.” The use of this word sets forth the clear condition given by God so the church at Ephesus might be reconciled to Him. Without the observance of the exceptive clause men will stand in violation of His will. Our assignment, “Churches Which Leave Their First Love” is based upon the statement found in Revelation 2:1-5. This powerful exhortation to correct the situation within the church was dependent upon the except clause.

About thirty years prior to the Revelation letter, Paul had penned these words: “And you *hath he quickened*, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Ephesians 2:1-3). From these verses we understand that they once had lived in sin, but had been made alive by their obedience to the gospel. Yet, now they had returned to their former state by “leaving their first love.” This passage teaches that it is possible to be saved then to turn back to the former lifestyle (2 Peter 2:20-22). There is a need to continually examine ourselves in light of God’s word (2 Corinthians 13:5; James 1:21-25). The members of the church at Ephesus needed to examine where they had been and where they were now! Why do people turn back? We do not know all of the answers. Some get tired; some wonder, “what is the use” and others fall in “love with the world” (1 John 2:15-17). For our study we will observe that it is a serious and dangerous thing to leave our first love.

The First Love

The word *first* comes from the Greek *protos* (πρωτος) and means *foremost* in time, place, order or importance best or chief (Strong’s number 4413). The love here referred to is love for the Lord; and the idea is, that as a church, they had less than that which they formerly had shown. With respect to this love they were in a state of having less than was their first state. Even though they still maintained and defended the teachings of Christianity, they somehow demonstrated less love than they had shown in the beginning.

Demonstration is the only way that love can be known. The words can be said, yet without demonstration love is never realized. The Father’s love was demonstrated in what was done for mankind; “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever

believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Jesus declared that love is to be demonstrated, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Therefore, we can conclude that the church in Ephesus was not being obedient to the Lord with the same zeal and motivation which they had shown before.

Paul had given the same admonition to the church at Corinth. “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing” (1Corinthians 13:2). Men can go through the motions and speak of their religious fervor, yet unless these things are motivated by love it is to no avail. In Galatians 5:6, Paul penned these words; “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.” Of what value are actions if, and only if, it is done by duty? We must never dismiss the necessity of obedience. We can go through the motions in service to God and still not be pleasing in His sight. “Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men” Isaiah 29:13.

All of our duties must be carried out by love. We understand that there is a sense in which we dread and fear the awful prospect of eternal punishment and steadfastly conduct ourselves so as to avoid such. 1 John 4:16-18 illustrates the necessity of love which overcomes the dread and fear of eternal torment. The man who loves the Lord with all of his heart will not fear Him in the day of judgment. In our present study we observe a congregation that had heart problems. The text does not say they did not love something. It says they had “left their first love” which was their love for the Lord and the complete teaching of the gospel. Labor is no substitute for love. What we are doing for the Lord and for the cause of Christ is important, and yet the motivating factor is important as well. What we do for the Lord must be motivated by love; “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love...by love serve one another” (Galatians 5:6, 13).

Ways in Which the Departure Is Exhibited

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Galatia and warned them of a departure from the faith, “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6-8). This passage clearly shows that men are carried away by false teachings. It is also possible for men and congregations to be carried away not only by false doctrines but also by not being doers of the word (James 1:23-25; Matthew 7:21-23). Thus we can see that a departure from the faith can come at the hands of believing a false doctrine or by not carrying out all that God has commanded. The latter seems to be the case with the Ephesian brethren.

Individually, how many today are going through the motions, doing the things required by God, yet not being motivated by love? Of course there is no way of knowing the answer to that question. However, we can observe the halfhearted manner in which some are living their lives and worshipping the Almighty. We would do well to remember the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 4:2-3

“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears.” Many in the church today never miss the “assembling” of the saints (Hebrews 10:25) yet never go beyond attendance. They never involve themselves in visiting those who are sick (James 1:27), those who are erring (Galatians 6:1-2) or those who need encouragement (Hebrews 3:13). There are those who have never tried to teach a lost soul the gospel. Sometimes individual Christians live their lives when away from the “eyes of the brethren” just as the rest of the world (1 John 2:15-17). They engage in things which are condemned by the word of God and they do not “shine as lights” before the world (Philippians 2:15). God’s word instructs individuals to “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). You see I can have an appearance before men that belies what I am in my heart. Our faith must be demonstrated by what we do which must be motivated by love. Individually, we can seem to be right while in truth we have left our first love.

Congregationally, the same sad situation is true. Many are going through the motions while at the same time they have left their first love. Whether individually or congregationally, the heart of the problem is to allow worldly things and false teachings to move us from the word of God. Many congregations never turn away from the requirements of worship. They observe the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week; they “give as they have prospered” each Lord’s day; they are “teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord;” they teach and preach the word of God, and they pray just as has been prescribed. They do not add to nor take away from the requirement for worship; yet they have lost their zeal for service to God. They are idle in restoring erring brethren and are not involved in evangelism. Some are likened to the church at Laodicia which had become “lukewarm.”

The Seriousness of Leaving Our First Love

We can never fully comprehend the extent to which God loves us. We read passages such as John 3:16; 1 John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-10; Romans 5:8 and they all declare a love which is above man’s ability to comprehend. We are able to love because “...He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). It is always easier to love someone that loves us and has demonstrated that love. I am told that the most devastating thing in the life of an individual is to love someone who does not love you. Who can fathom the feeling of loving someone and giving your all to make him or her happy, and then to have that person stop loving you? It really is beyond imagination. Hearts are broken, lives are shattered and years will never remove the sadness except that person return. I realize that I cannot begin to fully explain the emotional state of God, however I can know that a departure from Him causes a reaction in Heaven. Surely we can remember the statement in Genesis 6:6, “And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it **grieved him** at his heart.” Our actions can bring joy or sadness in the portals of Glory: “I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved; because they kept not thy word” (Psalm 119:158).

Not only does the leaving of our first love bring displeasure in Heaven, it will cause one to be eternally lost. In our text (Revelation 2:4) we must realize that when they left their first love the admonition for their return was given. The consequence is clear, “...else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Revelation 2:5).

Please observe the urgency voiced in this admonition; “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...” The removal of the candlestick is to remove the light, which was to shine in the congregation and stand as a beacon of their love and as acceptance in God’s sight. Just as a Christian is to be the light shining in the world, the Lord’s church is to be the light standing out in the darkness of this world. She is to be the “pillar and ground of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). We may not know exactly how or when the candlestick would be removed, but we do know that it would certainly happen. The candlestick is defined as being the church itself: “...the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches (Revelation 1:20). Therefore, we can conclude that the church at Ephesus would cease to exist if they did not “repent, and do the first works.” In his Commentary on the book of Revelation Albert Barnes noted:

“There is not the least evidence that the church at Ephesus did repent, and the threatening has been most signally fulfilled. Long since the church has been utterly extinct, and for ages there was not a single professing Christian there. Every memorial of there having ever been a church there has departed and there are no where, not even in Nineveh, Babylon, or Tyre, more affecting demonstrations of the fulfillment of ancient prophecy than in the present state of ruins of Ephesus...What is affirmed here of Ephesus has often been illustrated in the history of the world, that when a church has declined in piety and love, and has been called by faithful ministers to repent, and has not done it, it has been abandoned more and more, until the last appearance of truth and piety has departed, and it has been given up to error and to ruin.” (65)

It was and is a sad commentary on men when the church disappears from the face of the earth. I can call to mind some congregations which no longer exist due to the indifference or outright doctrinal error of her members. When God’s people leave their “first love” nothing but ruin can follow. Many congregations have no candlestick even though they still are in existence because they have left their first love also. We leave our first love when we abandon the truth, will not defend it (Jude 3), or will not practice it in our daily work for the Lord. Someone said; “there are some who are dead and do not realize it yet.” There are congregations who have more allegiance to schools than to the Lord. There are some which have adopted the way of denominationalism by implementing Children’s Bible Hour, House churches, singing groups, by having two services to accommodate the contemporary or traditional mindset and by other innovations introduced as a means of growth. Any of these are a departure from Bible authority and evidences the “leaving of our first love.”

Repentance Is the Only Cure

The word “except” makes clear the requirement for the church at Ephesus, “...I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.” The force of this admonition is that the only way they would survive was to repent. They were to turn back to their first love. It is interesting to note that the phrase “I will come unto thee quickly” is found in the King James Version but not in the American Standard. The American Standard omits the word “quickly.” This word is omitted in two of the oldest manuscripts. The Vulgate and Coptic versions, yet it’s presence is supported by one of the oldest manuscripts. The argument for or against its being included does not remove the urgency involved in the correction. In fact the literal translation

shows the urgency in that it says, “I am coming to you...” The real thing to be understood in “I will come unto thee quickly” is that their condition would not be overlooked (2 Peter 3:9).

Repentance is very often misunderstood in our world today. Some feel it means only to be sorry for a deed that is done. Others think that God will overlook sins which they call “weaknesses.” Note our text; “EXCEPT thou repent!” Nothing could be clearer. Those who are in sin must repent (Luke 13:3, 5).

Biblical repentance requires the changing of one’s mind. When there is godly sorrow due to our sin, there is then a change of conduct (2 Corinthians 7:10). This is in marked contrast to a sorrow which does not produce a change (Matthew 19:22). One man said, “The sorrow of the world” is not at the sin itself, but at its penal consequences: so that the tears of pain are no sooner dried up, than the pleasures of ungodliness are renewed.” Is this not what took place with the Pharaoh in Exodus? He spoke of his sin against God and asked for a reprieve from the plagues (Exodus 9:27-28) but his sorrow was soon changed to rebellion. Notice, “And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart, he and his servants” (Exodus 9:34).

Repentance also requires a remembering of our former state. In our text we read, “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen...” We should bring to mind what price was paid for the church (Acts 20:28) and what was done to bring about our salvation (Romans 5:8). The word remember carries the meaning of bringing back to the mind, rehearsing over in the mind. Thus we should ever keep in mind God’s love for us, and the price which was paid as a ransom for our souls (1 Timothy 2:6). Keep in mind that when we sin we affect God in an adverse manner.

Repentance must be accompanied by remorse. This involves deep regret for the sin committed. Remorse is an inner hurt for things which bring about separation (Isaiah 59:1-2). In this life when we become estranged for those we love deeply there should be a hollow aching down inside due to the separation from ones we love. How much more so when we realize that we are divided, separated from our heavenly Father. David lamented in Psalm 38:10, “My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me.” Our hearts should be broken when sin lives within us and our first love is no longer by our side (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Repentance is realized when we turn from and renounce and reject our sinful ways. Repentance carries the idea of putting away or putting off certain things. A congregation cannot tolerate and allow sin to abide in her midst, for in doing so the church is hurt and hindered. In 1 Corinthians 5 we realize the truthfulness of this affirmation. The church at Corinth had sin abiding in their membership and they were doing nothing to protect the purity of the Lord’s bride. Therefore, Paul required them to withdraw from the man living in sin. The only way they could remove the condemnation that was upon them was to put away the sinful man from their fellowship. Notice they were to change their thinking concerning this sin, remember what he had earlier written “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators” (1 Corinthians 5:9). They were to be

remorseful over the sin (“mourn” verse 2) and to renounce the sin (verse 13). This lesson is needed today just as in the early stages of church development.

Conclusion

In Revelation 2:1-11 the church at Ephesus was busy doing some of the things which were noted as positive. Yet they were not pleasing in God’s sight because they had left their first love. It will never please God to do part of His commandments. It will never please God to do His commandments unless we are doing them from a glad heart – a heart which seeks to please Him because our love for Him is deeper than our love for anything else. The Lord clearly illustrated this truth in Matthew 10:37, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

Clearly there are many who have left their first love. May we awaken to the fact that to depart from Him is to be lost and set our hearts to please Him in all things. Be assured that He will never leave us but will uphold us with His mighty hand (Psalm 89:13). He will never leave nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Keep in mind the admonition “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works...”

Works Cited

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