

Losing One's First Love

Charles G. Finney:

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee because thou hast left thy first love." Rev. 2:4.

This passage occurs in a part of this Epistle which Jesus dictated and John wrote to the Church of Ephesus, "These things saith he who holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks."

Christ says many good things of this Church. They had been jealous for the truth; they had found some to be liars and could not bear such; they had borne and had had patience. Christ always loves to say all the good he can of his people. The faults which he sees in them do not by any means blind his eyes to their good qualities.

Nor on the other hand, could their good things shut his eyes to their evil. "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee because thou hast left thy first love"

The word "somewhat" is in italics, indicating that there is no corresponding word in the original. The sense is given better without it. "I have it or this against thee, that thou hast left thy first love." The leaving of their first love is exactly the thing he has against them. This is what he means to say; and not this other thing--that he has a somewhat--a little objection to them because they had left their first love.

Mark the solemn threatening. "Repent; else I will come unto thee quickly and remove the candlestick out of his place;--that is--will annihilate the Church itself.

Discussing this subject I shall enquire:

1. WHAT THE FIRST LOVE OF A CHRISTIAN IS;
2. HOW IT EVINCES OR MANIFESTS ITS EXISTENCE;
3. HOW IT MAY BE KNOWN WHETHER PERSONS HAVE LEFT THEIR FIRST LOVE.
4. SOME OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS SIN.

I. First love involves sincere devotion of heart to God. Of course it includes all that such devotion implies;--confidence in God; sympathy with his benevolence; in short, it implies just what is implied when a wife is truly devoted to her husband and when true benevolence underlies all.

II. It manifests itself in an intense interest in his word. Think how much interest husbands and wives take in each other's letters. You who have been separated from each other know this well and can understand even a brief allusion. Or take the case of children who are absent from dear home; you know how they prize letters from those they love and from those in whom they confide. So in the very nature of the relation sustained by Christians towards their heavenly Father, they must be intensely interested in his letters--his written words. --These letters come from one we love supremely and trust implicitly; from one in whom we take a lively and affecting interest. Of course we shall have a desire to read them. We shall study them intently, and oftentimes with tears.

2. Again, this first love will manifest itself in an intense love for the ordinances of God's house. It will beget a lively interest in all the scenes and places where God is wont to meet the soul; --where so to speak, he has an appointment to meet his people to bless them. How sweetly the Sabbath rises on one who is in his first love! This, he says, is one of my best and most blessed days; my own Lord's day and I may surely meet him this day according to his own arrangement. How sweet the worship of God's house! All incomprehensible to those who never relish it! How can they expect to understand what they never experienced? I well remember how my own mind was impressed on the first Sabbath after my conversion. I had been in that congregation for some time; I had led the choir--had taken the same sort of interest that other sinners do. But now my heart was so drawn out to God that I wanted to keep my eyes shut all the day. I thought how I had led the choir without any real devotion. Indeed I had so much to think of, I felt that I could not open my eyes to have my mind diverted to external objects at all. The worship and ordinances of God's house were sweet beyond expression.

3. This first love manifests itself also in a cheerful obedience. He is perfectly joyful in its obedience.-- Weary of sinning, turning away from all transgression with deep unutterable loathing, he is prepared to run in the way of God's commands with all the heart. You know how we fear to displease those we love, how we supremely dread to offend those whom we love supremely. So the young convert has a conscience tender in the extreme, and sensitive to the least approach towards sin. He not only fears to sin himself, but he is deeply grieved at the sins of others. Are we not always grieved when our dear friends are absent?

4. First love implies great zeal for the cause and honor of God. With most intense care, he will refrain from whatever might dishonor God. On the other hand he will feel a great interest in the prosperity of God's cause. You will see him manifest the most lively joy in the prosperity of Zion and the most pungent grief in her calamities. All wakeful to the interests of religion--all jealous of everything that may injure those interests--full of care if anything threatens to go wrong--you will see in all those ways that his heart is in the cause of his Lord.

It will also manifest itself in self-denying labors for God and for souls. He will not count it a grievous thing to toil and deny himself for his Savior. You may always count upon his being ready to perform the most self-denying service with all cheerfulness.

The world will lose its dominion over his soul. His heart will set very loosely on worldly things, instead of being engrossed and absorbed in those interests. He will esteem them as of very little importance. Other things of far more absorbing interest are blessing his soul.

Again, this first love of converts will develop itself in intense desire for the salvation of sinners. It will be a love for souls;--a deep interest also in humanity in general. How strongly is the heart drawn out towards fellow-beings, in warm desire for the happiness of all mankind!

Especially you may see this love manifested towards enemies. If a convert in his first love has any enemies, you will see a more striking development of this love towards them than anywhere else. If his bosom burns with first love, he will surely love his enemies with a feeling of tenderness and forbearance very unlike what is often seen in such a world as this. Persons almost always think they may speak as reproachfully as they please of their enemies. But not so does the convert in his early love feel. He is ready to say--I may have been mistaken. That man whom I thought so hostile to me may sin much less than I had supposed. I will at least make for him all the apology I honestly can.

Again, this true love to God will manifest itself in the absence of a spirit of self-seeking. These persons are really devoted to God and not to self. Hence you will observe they are not continually making self the chief end of their efforts.

On the contrary, their [they] are full of intense interest in the conversion of sinners, and in all efforts bearing directly on the great end. You will hear them asking--How did the meeting of inquiry appear? What is the state of the prayer meeting? Was the Spirit of the Lord there? Were any souls converted to God? Were any convicted of sin? If a meeting of inquiry is appointed, they are asking--Who will go? Are there not some whom I can persuade to attend? If they see any indication of a revival, they are all awake. I recollect the case of a young convert whom I knew for several years. He made progress rapidly in grace himself, but the Church kept running down. At length some indications of a revival appeared. A young man arose in a prayer-meeting to say that his soul was borne down beneath a burden of sin. This young man could scarcely refrain from shouting and crying--Bless the Lord, for here are tokens of another revival! This was a living manifestation of his first love, living yet and burning in his soul.

III. Evidences of having left one's first love.

Being very much engrossed in worldly business. Seest thou a man in this state of mind? He is getting away from his first love. Sinking more and more deeply into the scenes and the spirit of business, his attention becomes more and more withdrawn from spiritual things, and soon he finds that when he does return to them, it is with decidedly abated interest. He may try to make himself think he is doing his business for the Lord; but let him beware lest even so it ensnare his soul and draw him from his first love.

Again, a legal spirit takes possession of his mind.-- He begins to do his service as a duty and not from love to God. They fall to duty-doing as they call it and make this their business. Their labors for God and the devoted affections of their soul do not flow out spontaneously, prompted by deep love which boils up so fervently that

their spirit naturally longs for communion with God as its daily food. The living christian loves to bathe his soul in such communion with God. But the man who has left his first love only presses himself into duty-doing as a thing he may not neglect.

Another evidence is an antinomian spirit. Whatever faith they have does not work by love. They may suppose they rely on Jesus Christ, but their faith lacks the distinctive spiritual feature, for it does not inspire true love, nor does it co-operate along with love in begetting active and cheerful obedience to God's law.

The meaning of the term Antinomian is -- against law. You will often see antinomians hold the Bible and the Sabbath very loosely. They have a slovenly way of getting on in religion. Their faith in Christ, instead of quickening their souls to love and to labor, serves only to make them feel vastly easy about everything of a spiritual nature. They trust in Christ in just such a way as makes them reckless about doing much to honor God or benefit man. They can do almost anything and yet never allow themselves to doubt that all is well.

While first love continues there will always be a careful discharge of duty and an equal care to maintain first love in its unabated warmth and power. It sometimes happens that when first love declines, duty-doing is kept up, with the heart out. This is but a sorry service to offer to God, when the affections of the heart are dropped out.

When persons have left their first love, they are often more anxious to obtain comfort in religion than to be reinstated in communion with God, so as to have power with him and a holy heart. Once they knew the comfort of public worship and of secret devotion. Now they know very little indeed about comfort, except as they find it in the hope that they shall yet be restored to see again the light of their Savior's face. When they lived near the Lord, how often were their hearts borne aloft as if enraptured with heavens' own music. But let their love die away, and with all their musical taste and cultivation, they get but little indeed of the rapture of soul they once found in Zion's songs. Now all their joys are in the music; they have lost all else.

In general you will find that if first love is lost, there will be a manifest loss of interest in whatever respects religion. On going to labor in a new field, I have had occasion to rebuke the leading men sharply for the small concern felt to provide things necessary for the comfort of the people and the success of the efforts to be made. If they had been about to have a public auction, they would have had due notice given -- the room comfortable -- all things in order. But here it is only a religious meeting; let anybody take care of its business. Little does it concern them, though the windows be broken -- the wood exhausted, or too green to warm the room.-- Their first love has gone and with it their lively interest in the work of saving souls. If full of love and interest, they would inquire -- Who were there? Was there prayer in that meeting? Was anything done? Are there signs of Zion's reviving?

But exactly over against this, if first love has declined, they ask no questions on such points, though they will be ready enough to ask questions on matters of business or pleasure. Oh, how many times you may see which way the wind blows by the flying feathers. You may learn where a man's heart is by noticing what it is that interests him most. If he can be more interested in a party of pleasure or an excursion ride, or in a political meeting, than he is in efforts to save souls and honor God, you may read his spiritual state at once. If the heart is true with God, nothing is to him like the solemn assembly, the season of prayer, and the communion his soul finds with God. In the spirit of the world, persons will go to a party of pleasure and never think the service long though it stretch onto 10, 11, 12, or 1 o'clock in the night. It is never too long for them. But oh, how long the meetings are, when there is nothing to entertain them, nothing to enjoy, but God!

The same loss of first love is manifested often by conformity to the world, You may detect this in many ways. When a young lady begins to backslide, she will begin to put on ornaments, jewelry, and costly attire.-- These things are natural indications of the state of the heart.

Again you will see them taking more interest in other books than in the Bible, especially in books of a worldly sort. They prefer worldly to spiritual conversation.-- They entirely forget to pray for others than themselves, or than their nearest friends who are a part of themselves.

Yet all these are only a part of the manifestations of this loss of first love. But we must pass now to speak,

IV. Of the consequences of losing one's first love.

He will be brought again under the dominion of old sins and propensities. Grace declining, sin will rise and reassert its sway. Strangely he will find himself returning, as the Scripture hath it, "like a dog to his vomit."

Where he had thought himself washed, he finds himself again "wallowing in the mire."

He will also have a sense of guilt, in place of that sweet peace of mind which he once enjoyed. Self-condemned, he can no longer feel a sweet assurance of acceptance and favor with God. His present religion is formal, and he cannot but see and know that it is.-- Hence he is thrown into serious and distressing doubts whether he were ever a child of God. Distrustful of himself, it is but natural that he should become distrustful of others, and ultimately uncharitable and severe in his judgments.

He ceases to be prevalent in prayer. He loses his hold on God; fails of obtaining sensible access to the throne of grace, and not improbably will begin to query whether anybody prays acceptably and whether prayer avails anything ever.

There will be for many reasons a constant tendency to self-delusion. Many a backslider wraps himself all round about with delusions. He says -- It is true I don't feel much, and I know my chief interests are absorbed in earthly things; yet still I think I am supremely devoted to God. The fact is if you have left your first love, you have opened the door for every form of delusion.-- You are not making one particle of real progress in religion. All is movement in the wrong direction.

Thus are the consequences of losing your first love fearfully disastrous.

REMARKS.

1. Those who have left their first love are a great stumbling block to all their acquaintance. They scandalize religion, misrepresent the gospel, and do just those things which most effectually shut the gate of heaven against immortal souls.

2. A state of backsliding of heart is most odious to God. There is nothing he more abominates than the forms and pretensions of godliness where the heart is gone. It is the instinct of human nature to abhor hypocrisy; how then must God abhor it? It never deceives him. He sees through it, even as if it had no covering.

3. It is withal a most dangerous state. It is dangerous because like all forms of sin, it tends to perpetuate itself; dangerous because it is insulting to God; dangerous because it abuses and grieves the Holy Spirit.-- If Christ would threaten to annihilate the church at Ephesus, despite of their many good qualities, unless they would repent of losing their first love, what may the individual Christian professor expect who falls into the same sin and provokes the same indignation?

4. Those who have never had a first love will not understand what I have been saying. They may suppose they do, but they do not and will not. But if you have known what a first love is and have not left it, you may in some measure understand;--yet only those who have once had a first love and have left it can be supposed to know the full reality of these things. Your experience covers the whole ground.

5. It is time this subject were brought home to your hearts and consciences. What is your state? Are you willing to make sacrifices? Do you love to make them for Christ and his cause? Have you retained even the religion you once had? Some of you, I know have made progress. You can say -- "How little I knew at first, compared with what I know now, of the height and depth and breadth of the love of God! On looking back, I can see how much of my first zeal was merely an animal excitement. Since those days, I think I have learned to live more truly upon God."

Still let me ask -- Where are you now? Have you measured the depth of the love of God, in your own experience of its power? Have you known successively one and another of Christ's offices by receiving him in them so as to taste and see their richness and their adaptation of your wants? Have you in this sense known the exceeding great and precious promises of God? Do you say -- Talk to me no more of my "first love;" that was only an infant's love; God has shown me broader things and deeper far -- even the great depths of his love. He has made me see that there is no end to the vastness and richness of his spiritual blessings. He has shown me indeed that in my Father's house is bread enough and to spare, so that I never need suffer from hunger.

If this be truly your state, you will experience real and deep grief over those who wander from their way and decline in their spiritual life. Your heart will be bowed in sorrow that they should fall so sadly and dishonor the Savior's name so grievously.

But some of you ought to see that these delineations of the state and guilt of losing your first love, apply to yourselves. You may, perchance, be very slow to admit this; while all your acquaintances see it, you may be

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blind to the glaring facts; yet as I said, you ought to see it and ought to be alarmed. It is high time that you were deeply concerned and crying out from the depth of your declension -- Where and how shall I find God? How can I regain my first love? Can I ever be forgiven? Shall my soul ever know again the joy of pardoned sin and of deep peace in God, my Savior?

One word to those who have recently expressed hope in Christ. How is it with you? Where are you? Are you planting your feet more and more firmly upon the Rock of Ages? Are you learning to take hold by faith of the arm that "bears creation up?" That arm can surely sustain God's children well. You need not fear while undergirded with Almighty strength. If underneath you are these "everlasting arms," you cannot fall or falter. "Even the youth shall faint and be weary and the young man shall utterly fall; but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."