

Losing First Love

Charles G. Finney:

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

In speaking from these words, I shall:

I. Notice briefly what the first love of a Christian is;

II. How it manifests itself;

III. How it may be known that Christians have left their first love;

IV. Describe the state into which they fall;

V. The only remedy for this state of things;

I. The Christian's first love is best known by experience. Those who are really brought from great darkness into marvellous light--from sensible condemnation into conscious and assured peace and joy in God, cannot but know what this first love of the convert is. Ardent, earnest, self-sacrificing,--it makes religious duties supremely delightful, and fills the heart with joy in God all the day long.

II. The modes of its manifestation are obvious, and have, indeed, been necessarily indicated in what I have said of its nature. It should be remembered that it is as natural to the Christian life to do what pleases God as for the sinner's life to do what pleases himself. For example, prayer is as natural to the true convert as living without prayer is to the unconverted. The latter are conscious of being pushed forward to perform these duties before they can be persuaded to do them. Other considerations besides the pleasantness of the thing itself must be brought to bear on the mind, or the man will not pray. But to the one who loves God, it is sweet to worship, and pray and praise. These things have a sweet attraction to his heart, and come with a rich relish to his soul.

The Christian, in his first love, is free from a sense of guilt and condemnation. He has great peace of mind, and, living in such faith as pleases God, he cannot have a sense of condemnation.

Again, nothing that God requires seems hard or grievous. No matter what it may be, "the yoke is easy and the burden light.["]

"'Tis love that makes his willing feet

In swift obedience move."

Even the burdens that pertain to the Christian life do not at all abate his interest in religious duties. He takes up these labors as part of his business in life. He feels no sense of burden in doing these laborious things; a divine peace fills his soul.

These states and experiences are, of course, unknown to the unconverted. Even some who think themselves converted, know them not, and are exceedingly jealous sometimes of those who do.

III. It may be known that persons have left their first love when they begin to talk of the burden of the Lord, and manifestly show that religion has become a weariness to them. If other considerations besides love to God are requisite to sustain the Christian life, and even to keep their outward observance of its forms, then you may be sure that their first love is gone. It may be that still "they cannot bear them that are evil;" Christ gives even the Ephesian church credit for so much; but this may be more a thing of conscience than of love.

Again, this loss of first love is indicated by a sense of bondage. When the Christian performs his religious duties, not from any sense of love, but of bondage to conscience, you may know that "first love" is gone. Obedience is not spontaneous. Under one's first love, it always is.

The annexed exhortation to "remember from whence they have fallen," shows that they had fallen from grace in the sense of having lost a gracious state of mind--a state in which the gifts of the Spirit beget the Christian virtues, and the resulting state of the heart is acceptable in God's sight. Such cannot be in a justified state. Can

it be possible that those are in a justified state whom God commands to repent, on pain of being blotted from the roll of his recognized churches?

IV. The state into which they fall is (1) one of hypocrisy . This must be the case unless they have become openly impenitent and irreligious. But the passage gives no hint of this. Of course we must conclude that they retain the forms of godliness without its power. This is real hypocrisy.

2. It is a state utterly odious to God. He who makes no pretensions to religion is odious enough; but one who makes professions and yet dishonors God, is much more so. But many sinners profess to love God. Ask them if they love God. O, yes, say they. Ask them if they love to pray and praise; and they will tell you they do. They make profession enough, but are only hypocrites.

3. It is, moreover, a state of delusion, for they keep up the notion that they are still accepted of God. They are so hardened as not to see that they are the victims of the most fearful delusion. Scarce any thing is more adapted to blind the mind and scar the conscience than hypocritical forms of prayer. Let a man practice prayer without any heart in it, and who does not know that this course benumbs the conscience and kills the moral sensibility? Trace the history of such a man's praying. The first time he prayed, prayer filled his soul with awe. Usually those who have not been accustomed to prayer, experience this impression of awe and reverence. But a moderately long period of observance of the mere forms of prayer, kills this solemn impression, and he can pray as coldly unconcerned as if he had no heart. Prayer makes no impression on him. Nothing seems to touch him. This keeping up the forms of religion in a heartless way is playing a game with ourselves in which the interests of the the soul are fearfully the loser. You win nothing.

Notice, also, that the influence of this on unbelievers is most ruinous. Nothing leads them so naturally to contemn religion as the sight of so much heartless profession. On the other hand, when they see a living manifestation of religion, it will either drive them towards religion or make them uneasy without it, or drive them further off. The latter effect is produced only when the heart's depravity rebels utterly against God's claims, and therefore, it is more a testimony for than against the agencies that excite it. But false professions are naturally fatal to the unconverted; and it is no wonder they are so. On this subject I am often reminded of impressions made on my mind in my early and unconverted life. I then had on my mind the strong impression that the great mass of professed Christians seemed not to understand what they professed. There were one or two men and some women who, I knew, had religion. They exhibited what I could not account for on any other supposition. Their life had more weight on my mind than the forms and professions of ten thousand of the other and more common sort. Being a lawyer, I could understand that the few gave a positive testimony, witnessing to what they knew, and revealing what their souls had certainly felt; while the testimony of the other class was only negative. It did not know anything in particular on the subject. I know one man who is not a Christian, but his wife is a Christian. He has been struggling for years to work himself into infidelity, but he cannot--never can so long as his wife lives to let the light of her example and spirit shine before him, or so long as he remembers her. I have already intimated the reason of this; he sees multitudes around him whose professed piety he contemns; but there is one--his own wife--whose life refutes infidelity most utterly.

Such religious declensions are most injurious to young converts. Said Dr. Hawes, of Connecticut, and Dr. Campbell of London--O, if these young converts could only be kept by themselves, and not be brought under the influence of dormant professors who have left their first love, they might be made a living and working church. But thrown back under this untoward influence, how surely will they fall under the same example of unbelief!

This state of mind must be painfully trying to Jesus Christ. What can be more so than to see his professed people lose their first love! When we see a wife who has lost all affection for her husband, it makes us naturally suspicious of him. Despite of all we can do to resist the feeling, it will arise. The wife is either lost to all the common impulses to humanity, or the husband is radically a bad man. Hence, when I see professed Christians lose their first love, I often say--Are you disappointed in Christ? Does he not bear acquaintance well? What has he done that you should lose your hearty interest in his character and in his cause? Is he in fault? If he is not, then surely you are--greatly so. This interest is entirely unavoidable.

The implication in backsliding, is most dishonorable to Christ. The Jews called God's service a great burden until he sent them a prophet to rebuke them. And who does not see that they deserved to be rebuked?

Ungodly men draw this inference: "If I must live such a life, let me put off its commencement as long as I can, for such a religion is not the thing to live by and enjoy." Who does not see that such an impression is most disastrous in all its influences?

These men who lose their first love are uneasy and unhappy. None of them can be satisfied with it. For the most part, they must be in great doubt as to their acceptance with God. Often they query with themselves--"I wonder if Christians ever do fall from grace. Methodists think they do; Presbyterians and Congregationalists think they don't. I hope they don't, for in this case I am safe. But if they ever do, then I am fallen." Thus they trust in an old hope, with nothing to rely on except their old experiences. They need some such reliance as men get by abusing the doctrine of saints' perseverance. It is not the true doctrine, but only in its perversion that they find any of this false peace; for the true doctrine holds that saints really persevere in love and faith; and that, falling from this, they have no ground of hope whatever. And if, instead of using God's promises of sustaining grace, they only pervert them to quiet their souls in sin, they are surely cheating themselves out of salvation!

Such persons are not prepared to die. If there is no truth in the Bible, they are sure to be lost, for the Bible pronounces their doom. If there were no truth in the Bible, they would be none the less lost, for they are not prepared to dwell in heaven--not in the heaven revealed in the Bible, nor in any other place of real happiness!

They are fallen into impenitence, as our passage itself implies; for how else could the Savior call on them to "repent?" Can one who is impenitent go to heaven?

They are not prepared to live to any good purpose. So far as their influence is concerned, it were better they should die than live. To live, as to them, is only to curse others by their example, and to treasure up wrath against the day of wrath for themselves.

V. The only remedy for this condition is given in the text: "Repent and do your first works." Repent more deeply than ever before, for now there are new and more aggravated sins to be repented of. When one has waded through such a life, all his former sins, prior to his professed conversion, are as nothing compared with these. After being so far enlightened, and after having tasted the good word of God and his precious love--after having known God and Christ as revealed in the gospel, and after having entered into covenant with God--then to violate this sacred covenant--to disown those solemn vows--to dishonor that ever-to-be-remembered name;--for all this, there can be no remedy short of coming down into the lowest dust before the Lord--lower than ever before--with confessions of greater guilt than ever before. Hence, it comes to pass that, where persons, once backslidden, do really return and repent, they are more thoroughly broken in spirit than they ever were before.

REMARKS

Many persons keep just enough of what they call religion to fasten their delusions on their own souls. By dint of resolution and self-impulses, they keep up the forms of family prayer and of public worship, and by these means, they sustain the delusion that they are true Christians. If they had dropped these forms and gone into open apostasy, they would have known themselves, and would not have once thought of maintaining a hope of personal religion. The delusion could not have existed. But those who maintain the forms of religion, and the forms only, cannot have the witness of God's Spirit--can have no evidence from their own daily experience, but content themselves to live on the most meagre allowance of testimony to their own piety. They dare not speak very confidently, yet they are hopeful. They love to bring up the case of persons who had a great many doubts and yet, on the whole, are esteemed good Christian people. Some of them live on the doctrine of election, or perseverance of saints. Some live on the case of those who were reclaimed just before death. They sing the backslider's hymns and pray the backslider's prayer. From every quarter they are picking up shreds of matter of every sort wherewith to feed their own delusion. Sometimes, to help themselves out of their trouble, they set themselves to pick flaws in better Christians than themselves. This avails to relieve their conscience a little.

This is a most common delusion. A minister related to me certain facts respecting a doctor of divinity whom I had myself known, and in whom, I must say, I had never seen much evidence of personal piety. When this doctor of divinity came to die, he was greatly concerned about himself. My informant said--He asked me to pray that he might be restored to his first love! What! one who had lived forty or fifty years in the church, and one of her honored ministers too, yet, on his death-bed, asks his friends to pray that he may be restored to his first love,--really, that he may be converted! If we have not even so much as first love--not so much as when we started, what are we? What state are we in, if we have not as much love as when first converted?

Many persons have occasionally strong exercises of mind--often a compound of anxiety about their final salvation, and conviction of sin--yet it falls short of true religion. They quite fail of coming into a state of true love to God or to Jesus Christ. There is feeling, action, energy; but love is wanting! That deep love which affectionately honors and recognizes God as supreme Lord and Father, and which then goes forth to embrace in its arms all his offspring; that love which "suffereth long and is kind"--which is never weary in well-doing--which finds its life in acts of kindness:--this is not there.

Losing First Love

My beloved people, I have been your pastor now a long time. Going in and out before you as I have these many years, I have seen most of you pass through seasons that have been greatly interesting to me. In some of you I have seen grace developed and shining all the more clear and lovely for your trials; but of some of you I am constrained to ask--Have you not lost your first love? Is it not very difficult for you to live a Christian life? Some of you are in such a state that I have not seen you at a prayer-meeting for a year. You were not confined to your bed by sickness; you were not out of town; what was the matter? What is your spiritual state?

Of some of you who do come to the prayer meeting I must ask--What is your state? Is your experience daily becoming more rich, and more fresh, and more quickening? Do you live more closely on God? Are you daily walking more and more surely in newness of life?