# Restoring Our First Love

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*"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are 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. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. 3 I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have* ***abandoned the love you had at first****. 5 Remember then from what 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 is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 Let anyone who has an ear listen to* ***what the Spirit is saying*** *to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God*." (Revelation 2:1-7)

## 1. God's Love Has No Expiration Date

In a recent survey, an overwhelming number of US teenagers stated that they hoped to get married and stay married for the duration of their lives. We know however that there are still many marriages in the US and other countries that end in divorce. There are some studies that suggest that romantic love has a high for three years and drops after that time. Does our love have an expiration date? What about God's love?

I've heard that Jim McCusker's family was planning to celebrate his birthday today. But he returned to the Lord yesterday morning. I was planning to visit his family to take his family photos, but God called him home sooner than I thought. When I was thinking about Jim, I asked myself, did God's love for Jim run out yesterday?

Jeremiah 31:3 says, "***The LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you***." God comes to his people with a deep and everlasting love. The Lord is eager to do the best for his people. Why does God love his people with an everlasting love? In Jeremiah 31:9, God says, "***Because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son***." The Bible tells us that God is Jim's and our father and Jim and each one of us are God's precious children. No one can break the relationship between the father and his children. Therefore, God's love for us never ends.

**2. The First Love Has been Abandoned**

What about our love for God? Revelation chapters 2 & 3 are the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. Revelation 2:2 & 3 say, "***I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.*** [3] ***I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary****."* The Ephesian church is commended for their hard work, perseverance, their condemnation of wicked men, and their identification of false apostles. In addition, they are commended for enduring hardships and for not growing weary in serving the Lord.

However, in verses 4 & 5, the Lord says, "***But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what 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****."* The Ephesians are told to restore their first love, their love for the Lord. Paul once commended the church in Ephesus for its love for God and for others (Ephesians 1:15). But the church had fallen away from that first love.

What about us? What do we do to regain our first love for the Lord? The Lord first calls us to <u>remember</u> the intimate relationship we once had with the Lord. Exodus 19:4-6 says, "***You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*** [5] ***Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples….*** [6] ***but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation***." God reminds the Israelites of what God has done for them. The Israelites are God's "treasured possession," "a priestly kingdom," and "a holy nation." How often can we remind ourselves of the ways God loves us and blesses us throughout our lives?

Second, Jesus asks the Ephesian believers to <u>repent</u>. "Repent" means to change the direction, turning around toward the Lord. Why is this mentioned to the early church? At the time, the seven churches were experiencing the persecution that took place under Emperor Domitian (A.D. 90-95). John was exiled to the island of Patmos (off the coast of Asia). Since Christ died on the cross, many Christians thought that there was no higher honor than to imitate that death through accepting martyrdom. However, some people wanted to avoid persecution and gave up on Christian faith and worshipped the local gods and goddesses.

According to the Acts of the Apostles chapter 19, Paul visited Ephesus around A.D. 53, about 43 years before this letter in Revelation was sent to them. Paul remains in the city for several years and preaches the gospel so "***that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the***

***word of the Lord***" (Acts 19:10). The church in Ephesus had a long history and is the most prominent one in the area. But it is so sad that the passion and enthusiasm for preaching the good news of Jesus had diminished.

What about us? Do we need to "repent"? If the answer is yes, what do we have to repent? I believe that we need to repent that we do not have the passion and enthusiasm that Paul and the early Jesus' followers had. John Wesley and his followers had the same passion and enthusiasm for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**3. A Contagious Methodist Movement**

In the book entitled "The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement," Dr. George Hunter, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, says that Methodism "was once a great contagious movement in North America" but now finds itself in a "mess." Despite this, Hunter states that the church may have a great future if it is able to make the right choices.

The problem that Hunter identifies is that Methodism, which "started out as a missional alternative to establishment Christianity… has now become the establishment Christianity that it once critiqued." Hunter believes that the first step is to embrace again Wesley's "magnificent obsession simply to recover the gospel, the theology, the vision, the mission, and the contagion of early Apostolic Christianity." Hunter proposes three bold directions in ministry: lay ministries, small groups, and missional Christianity. I believe that these three strategies are the main characteristics of Methodist movement.

**4. Small Groups**

Today, I'd like to talk about the small groups. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, started a small group. These groups were called, "Class Meetings" and made sure that every person in the church was connected to another Methodist and that no one was left out. These meetings focused on people's current state of their relationship with God and connecting people to others who were in different stages of Christian life.

Both Wesley in England and Asbury in America believed class meeting attendance should be mandatory for every Methodist. Admittance to the larger Society Meeting required a ticket from a Class Leader, validating one's faithful participation in a class meeting. Pledging to participate in class meetings were required when people joined the Methodist Church.

Are there any United Methodist Churches that have Class Meetings today? Christ Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida invites members to come together in what they call "Wesley Fellowship Groups." A group of a dozen people gathers weekly to take turns answering a single question, "how is it with your soul?" Today we might use the phrase, "how is your spiritual life?"

Through answering this question, the Class Meeting members grow closer to one another and closer to Christ. The members look out for one another and share God's love with each other.

As it was in the days of Wesley and Asbury, Christ Church's Wesley Fellowship groups, make disciples by connecting people to one another, helping them grow in their discipleship, and encouraging them to mentor each other spiritually.

I hope that we are able to foster community like this in our church and that everyone feels connected to at least one other church member and that these groups can encourage one another in small groups. One of the goals of my trip to England today is to learn more about the class meetings and to experience John Wesley's passion and enthusiasm for sharing the love of God.

**5. Conclusion**

Although popular culture will often tell us that love has an end, we know that love doesn't necessarily have to fade away with time. God's love doesn't diminish. God loves us and his love is everlasting. To restore our first love for God, we need to remind ourselves of God's love for us and God's continued presence in our daily life. God loved us so much that Jesus came to this world and gave his life for us all. And Jesus promised his disciples that he would be with them always to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

There was a couple who had married for 40 years. They were driving home after a celebration at a restaurant on their 40th wedding anniversary. The wife was sitting on the passenger side. Her husband was behind the wheel. She began to lament: "Oh, honey, do you remember when we were so close? I mean, I remember when we first got married. We sat so close that you could hardly shift the gears. The husband responded with a shrug, "Well, I never moved…" That's the way it is with our relationship with our Lord Jesus: We may say today: "Lord, I remember when we used to be close." Jesus would answer: "I never moved." Our Lord Jesus has never moved.

**6. Application**

Why do we try to restore our first love for the Lord and his people? The reason isn't for the benefit of others or for God but ultimately for ourselves. When we restore our first love for God, we will be happier than ever before. When we love the Lord and others, we will be full of hope and know that God takes care of us. When we restore our first love for Jesus, we can experience God's saving grace in our lives and in the lives of those around us with whom we share God's love and forgiveness. Amen.