

# Have you lost your first love

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## **Have you lost your first love?**

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 26th September 2004.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:1-7)

## **Introduction**

The question I wish to ask you as you read this sermon is this: "Have you lost your first love?" The question arises from a verse which is part of a letter that Jesus told his apostle John to write down for the church which met in a town called

Ephesus. The verse says this: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." (Revelation 2.4).

It is not as though it was all bad in the church. In the same letter Jesus told the members of the church that there was a lot to commend them. He said "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." (Revelation 2.2) These people were active. They were hard working. They were busy serving God. They had perseverance. They had kept on going in spite of difficulty. Jesus also said "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false." The people who were members of this church had not compromised their faith. They had checked out to see if teachers were true or not, and those who were not they had not tolerated. This was also a church that had been through hard times, and had come out the other side still serving God. Jesus said, "You have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary" (Revelation 2.3). In spite of perhaps many years of difficulty, the members of the church were still serving God.

So in many ways, the church seemed like it was receiving a glowing commendation from Christ. Indeed, if the letter had ended there, we would undoubtedly have thought of the church in Ephesus as being one of the most faithful and healthy churches of all time.

But then Jesus added, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." You cannot help thinking that Jesus was drawing an analogy with what happens so often in human relationships. A young couple meet. They are very strongly attracted to each other. They start going out. As the relationship deepens they feel that they have met the person they want to spend the rest of their lives with. They get engaged. They get married. And then, as time goes on, with all the pressures of work, bringing up children and looking after

the home, the romance goes out of the relationship. They are not going to get divorced. They will still be faithful to each other, but the tenderness, the warmth, the delight in being in each other's company has gone. It has settled down into a mediocre, functional, relationship. The main subject of conversation is who is going to go to the parents' evening, or who is going to mend the broken chair. They have lost their first love. Now Jesus is saying to the members of the church in Ephesus, in effect, "You have lost your first love. You are doing all the right things. You are still faithful to me. You have not denied the faith. You are still serving me. You have not fallen into gross sin. But the romance has gone. I want your devotion. I want your heart. I want that closeness that there was once before."

Now I wonder if Jesus might say the same to you? Perhaps you are a Christian. You have served Christ faithfully, perhaps for many years. You have been through hard times, and still come out serving him. You have got a very strong understanding of Christian doctrine. You have a strong gift of discernment, and you can "suss out" false teaching. You have not fallen into gross sin. All this is very good and commendable. But has that first love for Christ evaporated? Has your relationship with him settled down to a mediocre, functional relationship?

Have you lost your first love? I expect that many of us would say, "I don't think I have. I love Christ. In fact I love him more now than I ever have." However, we need to watch out for self-deception. I expect that many of the people to whom Jesus addressed this letter, if you had asked them, would have said "I love Christ. Look at all the ways I am serving him. You couldn't possibly suggest that my love for him has gone off the boil could you?" And yet that is exactly what Jesus did say to them. Our hearts can be deceitful, and we can con ourselves into thinking that things with Christ are better than they actually are.

So I want us now to consider together what will be the signs that we have lost our love for Christ, and then to consider what the answer is to a loss of first love.

## **1. Signs of having lost your first love**

What then are the signs of having lost your first love? Here are some things which indicate a loss of that first love.

### **1) A decline in personal prayer**

The first thing I would mention is a decline in personal prayer. I am not talking about whether or not you pray out loud in prayer meetings. That can have as much to do about personal temperament as anything else. Some of us have no inhibitions about speaking out loud or praying out loud. But others are naturally much more shy and timid, and they will be much more hesitant to speak up or to pray out loud in a meeting. What I am talking about is your own private personal prayer life, those times when you go to your own room and shut the door and get alone with God.

Does this ever happen? Do you ever spend time alone with God? If so, when did it last happen that, all on your own, you sought God in prayer? This morning? A week ago? A month ago? A year ago? If you find it hard to remember when you last spent time with God alone in prayer, then I can tell you for sure, your love for Christ is very weak. Who ever heard of a man who said he loved his wife, but never wanted to be alone with her? What sort of a love does he have for her? He does not mind doing things in a group of people with her, like going to the cinema or going to the theatre with a group of friends, but any opportunity for him to be alone with her he shies away from. Does this man really love his wife? I think not. Equally, a person who rarely takes the opportunity to be alone with God cannot be said to love him.

And what happens when you do get alone with God in prayer? Is it a stilted, dry, formal affair, where you are "saying your prayers", or do you freely and fully pour out your heart to God? Imagine a husband and wife on a day out together. Suppose the husband takes a romantic phrase book with him from which he reads out phrases to his wife. Will she be impressed? Yet some think that prayer is a matter of reading out set prayers written down hundreds of years ago, or reciting them. And even if you do pray with words of your own, is your heart in it, or are you just going through the motions? You know that as a good Christian you should pray. You have your list of people and things to pray for. You tick them off one by one in your mind as you go through. And then, once you have done that you say to yourself "Well, that's my prayer time done for the day. Now I can get on with my life." If that is your approach to prayer, your love for Christ has gone cold.

## **2) A loss of appetite for the Word of God**

Hearing the Word of God is the mirror image of prayer in our relationship with God. In prayer we speak to God. Through his Word, God speaks to us. It therefore must go virtually without saying that if we love Christ we shall love to hear his voice through his Word. Come back to this husband and wife on a day out together. Suppose, as they are walking through the woods, the wife starts to talk with her husband about some of the concerns she has, and then she looks at her husband, and it is clear that his mind is miles away. He is thinking about something totally different. He has not listened to a word she has said. She would be forgiven for thinking that her husband has hardly any love for her. So it is with God. How can we say that we love him if we have no real interest in what he has to say to us?

Again, the acid test is how you are when you are alone with God. Do you spend time with God, just you and him, with the Bible, allowing him to speak to you? And when you read the Bible, are you quickly reading through to get done your "quota" for the day, or are you allowing God to speak into your heart and soul, to expose wrong thinking and living, and to allow him to change you?

If we love Christ, we shall love his Word. The Psalmist says "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." (Psalm 119:97). Do you love the Word of God? Again the Psalmist says the righteous man's "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1.2) Do you delight in the Word of God? When it is time to gather to hear the Word of God on Sunday, or during the week, do you say in your heart, even if not out loud, "Oh dear, now I have got to go and sit through another sermon!"? Or do you say, "Great! Here is a chance to hear from the God I love so much!"?

### **3) Complacency about sin in our lives**

It is obvious from human relationships that if you love someone you will want to please that person. So it is that if you love Christ, you will want to obey him in everything. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14.15).

Are you going forward in your relationship with God, or is there a "sticking point" where he has pointed out some sin in your life, and you have said, effectively, "no, I am not going to obey God on that point." If that is the case, you have lost your first love.

### **4) A complaining spirit**

One of the surest signs that we have lost our first love is when we develop a complaining spirit towards God. If we start to

moan about our lot in life, start to entertain thoughts of self-pity, and start to say to ourselves "poor me", then we can be sure that we have lost our first love. This is what we see in human relationships. The newly wedded couple go off on their honeymoon starry-eyed, totally happy and content with each other. Then the faults start to come out. How will they handle each other's faults? Will they talk about these things through and work out their relationship in a loving way, or will the relationship go sour? Will the husband turn into a grumpy individual, stomping moodily around the house? Will the wife turn into a "dripping tap", constantly moaning about this and that thing that is no good? If these things happen then the sweet love that they had at first will go cold.

Now the weakness of the analogy that I have drawn is that with God there are no faults, so there is no legitimate reason for any one of us to complain. God is "the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4). But the devil will come to us and will try to persuade us that God has some how been unloving or unfair in the way he has dealt with us. He will try to get us to doubt the Word of God, and to believe that either God is too weak to control events in a way which is for our good, or that he is too unloving to do so. He will seek to get us to forget the astonishing love that God has shown to us in sending his Son to die for our sins, even when we were sinners. He will try instead to make us think that we unloved, miserable wretches. He will seek to turn our eyes away from the glorious inheritance that God has got stored up for us at the resurrection, and try to make us think that there is no future for us except miserable doom and gloom.

If you believe the devil, and entertain doubts about the goodness of God, and worse still, start to develop a miserable, sour, complaining and self-pitying attitude toward God, then you have lost your first love.

## **5) Love for this world**

What happens in a marriage when things have gone sour between a husband and wife? Affection very easily gets turned towards someone outside the marriage. For the woman who has lost her first love for her husband, little by little other men will seem to be attractive. There will be a flirtations friendship, and perhaps something more serious will develop.

So it is, that if we lose our first love for Christ, other "gods" will start to seem attractive to us. What will we be drawn to? This world. The pleasures of this world will tug at the strings of our hearts, and we will find ourselves loving this world rather than Christ.

The thing is that we are all born lovers. We have all got to love something. So if you do not love Christ, you will love some cheap substitute of an idol instead. And what is that? Spiritual adultery. Do you love this world? Then you have lost your first love.

## **6) A lack of love for the people of God**

Imagine a single man who meets a widow and falls in love with her and marries her. If that woman has children by her first husband who had died, the new husband will love those children as his own. Why? Because he loves his wife. Because he loves her, he will love those she loves, for her sake. He knows that if he were to spurn those children, he would cause great distress to his wife, and he does not want to do that because he loves her.

So it is with Christ. If you love Christ, you will love Christ's people, if for no other reason than that Christ loves them. If you love Christ you will not want to hurt him by having bad thoughts towards his people. He loved his people so much that he gave his life for them. If you love Christ, you will love his



people with the same love that he has for them. This is the point that John makes in his first letter chapter 5 verse 1, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.". If you love a man, you will love his child. If you love God the Father, you will love his children. If you love Christ, you will love his brothers, those he died for.

Do you love God's people, or has your love for the people of God gone cold? If your love for the people of God has gone cold, this can only mean that your love for God has gone cold. If you have bitterness and resentment in your heart, then you have lost your first love for Christ. If you are habitually rude, angry, unkind, and unpleasant to God's people, then I can say without a shadow of doubt that your love for God is very weak. If your tongue is full of backbiting and slander and gossip about the people of God, then your professed love for God is a hypocritical sham. James says, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." (James 1:26)

## **2. What we should do if we have lost our first love**

What then should we do if we have lost our first love? The first thing I would say is this: we need to examine ourselves to see whether we have ever loved God. It is possible that the lack of love for God that has been exposed to you through this sermon is not because you have lost your first love for God, but that you have never had a love for him, due to the lack of real conversion to Christ. So the first thing I would say to you is this: Are you a Christian? Have you been born again? Have you realised that you are a Hell-deserving sinner? Have you looked to Christ to be your Saviour? If the answer to these questions, upon examination, is "no", or "not sure", then what you must do is come to Christ. Some houses can be made good with a

lick of paint and a few repairs. Other houses are so riddled with rot that the only thing you can do with them is pull them down and rebuild them. So, if you are already a Christian, your loss of first love to Christ can be "repaired". But if you are not a Christian, the only solution is a demolition and rebuilding of your life. You need to be born again. You need a new heart. And only God can do this. You need to come to him and ask him to do that miracle in your heart.

But what if you are a Christian? You can honestly answer "yes" to the questions I asked above. What should you do if you realise that you have lost your first love?

### **1) Wake up to your condition**

From time to time those who are doctors come across patients who are in denial about the real nature of their illness. Here is a patient who has a serious case of lung cancer. The X-rays clearly show large white patches where the tumours are. A biopsy has confirmed the diagnosis beyond doubt. He has severe pain and a wracking cough. He is advised that his only hope is the removal of a large section of a lung, followed by intensive chemo-therapy. But the patient refuses any treatment, maintaining that all he has is a bit of a cold. What hope is there for that patient as long as he stays in denial about his real condition?

As Christians we can "go into denial" about our spiritual health. The symptoms of our malaise can be clearly presented to us, but we carry on saying to ourselves "I love the Lord, I love the Lord". If we do that, there is little hope for our recovery, at least not until things get really bad, and we are forced to admit our condition. So the first thing we have to do is to wake up from our spiritual sleep, and realise the serious condition into which we have fallen. Jesus said to the church to whom he wrote this letter "Remember the height from which

you have fallen" (Revelation 2.5). If you have lost your first love, you need to come to your senses, and realise that all is not well. You need to remember the love for Christ that you have had in the past and realise that what you have now is only a pale reflection of what you have previously known.

## **2) Repent**

The next thing Jesus said the church should do is to "repent". The greatest commandment of all is that you should "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22.37). Lack of love for God is a sin. In fact, it is the greatest of all sins, because it is a breach of the greatest of all commandments. We must repent of our lack of love for God.

## **3) Go back to the love you had at first**

Jesus then said "do the things you did at first". In other words he was saying, "Have the same love that you had when you were newly converted, when the wonder of God's forgiveness first dawned upon your soul."

How do we do this? By going back to the very basics of the Gospel. Remember the dreadful state you were in prior to your conversion. Think of the torment in hell to which you were heading. Think of how utterly unable you were to save yourself from that condition. Realise afresh that it is only the death of Christ on the Cross that made your salvation possible. Marvel at the kindness God showed you in granting you faith to believe in Christ. Fix your mind on the heavenly glory that is coming to you at the resurrection.

What should we do to keep our love for Christ fresh? Meditate constantly on God's Word, particularly on those portions which speak of his grace in the Gospel. Take all the means that God provides to keep our spiritual life strong, particularly

fellowship. Pray for the Holy Spirit to fill our lives with the knowledge of his love.

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