

# Recapturing Our First Love

M. W. Bassford, 9-11-11

In many ways, this year has been a difficult one for the congregation. Everything we do is overshadowed by the pall that our country's continuing economic troubles have cast over all of us. There are several brethren here who are struggling with job-related issues of various sorts. We've seen a number of our members die. We've seen some more members move away. We've even had to address some serious questions about whether our eldership should continue.

Just like repeated illness will take a toll on the human body, all of these challenges have taken their toll on us. I spend a lot of time thinking about where the congregation is and where it's headed, and for the past several months, I've had the sense that we aren't as happy, optimistic, or enthusiastic as we were a year ago or two years ago. Several of the members here are struggling spiritually, and many of the rest of us have let our spiritual guard down, at least a little bit. There have been some changes in our attitude that are causing problems already, and will cause worse problems in future if we don't get them under control. When I say this, I don't mean to single out one person, or even a group of people. These problems are widespread throughout the congregation, and this is a sermon for all of us.

We can't effect our nation's economic climate, we can't keep our brethren from passing on, but we can work on our behavior and our hearts. I'm not saying these things for the joy of blasting my brethren. I'm saying them because I love you and believe in you, that deep in your hearts, you do want to put God first, but sometimes it's easy for all of us to lose our way, and we need God to call us back. Let's see what He has to say about recapturing our first love.

## Humility.

I would divide the problems that I've seen into two main categories, and the first is **HUMILITY**. Peter defines the importance of humility in 1 Peter 5:5. A church without humility is like a car engine without motor oil. The parts start to rub against each other, the temperature rises, and soon the whole thing seizes up. The only way that we as a church can keep things running smoothly is when we have a humble, submissive attitude toward one another. We show this humility when we believe the best about our brethren, when we make everyone in the body the object of our love rather than the target of our criticism, when we don't feel compelled to argue our perspective until the bitter end, when we acknowledge that our way doesn't have to be the way that things are done all the time. If you struggle with this, I'm right there with you. I've never had an easy time being humble, although the Lord knows He's given me plenty of reasons to be! As alluring as pride can be, we cannot allow ourselves to be proud, because of the damage we will do the church.

As part of this, let's remember what the Bible tells us about **THE ANGER OF MEN**. Look with me at James 1:19-20. All of us have beliefs about the way that things should be. Sometimes, those beliefs are founded on the word of God. At other times, though, those beliefs are founded on nothing stronger than our opinions. In our minds, we must take care to distinguish between these two groups. If the Bible says something, we have a God-given responsibility to repeat it and to require that our brethren live up to it. However, if a brother violates one of our personally formed beliefs, that doesn't give us the right to chew him out about it, and it doesn't even give us the right to get mad about it.

Insisting on our opinions can become a danger in many different areas. We can see a brother doing something in the worship that we don't approve of, and once we've gotten upset with him, whether we confront him about it or just let our anger eat away at us like a swallow of battery acid, either way, we are harming the church. We can learn that a brother isn't following one of our personal beliefs outside of the assembly and gossip about it, so that fault lines start to form in the body that the Lord wanted to be one. In this, as in all things, we must be honest about what the Scripture says. We can't go hunting through the Bible for justification for the belief that we already have. Instead, we have to sit quietly and listen to God when He speaks, even if He isn't telling us what we want to hear. That's the only way to be righteous.

Likewise, we must show appropriate concern for **SPECKS AND LOGS**. Jesus explains this concept in Matthew 7:3-5. As Christians, one of the easiest things for us to do is to look at somebody else's life and list off all of the things that they need to change to be pleasing to God. It's easy because it doesn't require anything from us. We don't have to struggle and fight for Brother Jones to become more Christlike. All we have to do is go to Brother Jones and tell him about all the things he's doing wrong, or maybe just go to our buddy and tell him about all the things Brother Jones is doing wrong. That's easy. What is hard is for us to honestly evaluate our own lives, measure all the areas where we fall short, and then make those spiritual changes ourselves. That does require blood and sweat and tears. Is it any wonder, then, that so many Christians prefer to focus on the faults of others instead of their own? Sadly, this interest in somebody else's specks is alive and well in our congregation. Believe it or not, in this year, there has been a time or two when Brother A has come to me complaining about something Brother B is doing, and a couple days later, Brother B has come to me complaining about some separate thing that Brother A is doing. In both cases, the complaining brother had a point. However, both brethren would have been better off worrying about themselves first and somebody else second.

Finally, we need to make an effort toward **PLEASING ONE ANOTHER**. Paul raises this point in Romans 15:1-2. What he's telling us is that when we decide how we're going to behave, we need to think about not just whether we can make an argument that it's not sinful. We need to think about the effect that it's going to have on others and on the church. This applies especially to the men in our congregation who are leaders or who should be leaders. When one of those influential men chooses not to be a part of some outside spiritually oriented activity, like one of our prayer breakfasts, that's a problem. Is it a straight-up sin to skip a prayer breakfast? I don't think so. However, when one of those men makes that decision to be elsewhere, here's what happens. Other Christians notice that he isn't there, they get upset about it, and he loses the influence and the moral authority that make it possible for him to lead.

Let's say that another brother engages in morally ambiguous activity and posts about it on Facebook. Is that sinful? As I said, these are morally ambiguous activities where there isn't a clear thou-shalt-not. I'm not the judge of my brother. God is. However, how are all those Facebook posts going to go over with the brethren who believe that the activity is a sin? I'll tell you what will happen. They will think less of the brother for the choices he's making, and he won't be able to be an effective leader in the church either. There are other, similar examples, but I'll cut to the chase. There are many men here who should be leading their brothers and sisters on to heaven who have diminished or destroyed their capacity to lead by making ill-considered decisions. Brethren, we must do better than that.

### **Fruitfulness.**

The other area where we've been struggling recently is the area of **FRUITFULNESS**. Jesus tells us how important it is to be fruitful in John 15:2. If we want our relationship with Jesus to continue, we need to be bearing fruit. There must be good works in our lives that demonstrate that we are producing and growing as disciples. This is not some kind of optional, bonus activity. This is what God demands from us, and if we don't, He will cut us off.

We must first make sure that we engage in **FRUITFUL SPEECH**. Paul describes how our speech should be in Ephesians 4:29. This passage makes clear that we have both a negative and a positive responsibility for what we say. It's not enough for us to avoid actively harmful statements. Instead, we must say only the things that build our brethren up and give grace to our listeners. We need to pay particular attention to this passage in our Bible classes. It's essential for us to engage in a full, thoughtful discussion of the Scripture, but it's also essential for us to keep that discussion from devolving into wrangling about words. Once again, this is an area where I am guilty. By nature and training, I'm a disputatious kind of guy. At times when I should be looking to persuade and teach others, it's all too easy for me to look instead to win an argument. I fear that this same contentious spirit has marked too many of our Bible classes recently. When I'm teaching the class, I have an opportunity that most in the class don't, to look at the faces in the crowd and see how people are taking things. Recently, I've seen an expression on the faces of our visitors and our newer members that doesn't speak well of us. They aren't impressed by our devotion to the word. They're disgusted by our petty bickering. I fear that our Bible classes may be driving people away from Christ, and the need for change could not be more obvious.

On a broader scale, we need to take care to remove the **THORNS** from our lives. Jesus famously elaborates on this idea in Matthew 13:7, 22. There are all kinds of things that the devil can do to us short of causing us to fall away. He can dangle enough money in front of us that we spend our lives pursuing wealth. He can distract us with trials and troubles and cares. Even if those things don't cause us to forsake Christ entirely, they can still be a victory for Satan if they cause us to become unfruitful. I'm afraid this is something that I'm working through right now. I'm still trying to come to grips with my mother's death, I'm trying to deal with all of the chaos attending the birth of my son, and those things plus a bunch of other distractions have made me a less effective preacher than I ought to be. That's understandable, but it's not excusable. God expects more from me than that, and I need to change.

I know I'm not the only Christian here dealing with problems. Many brethren have personal issues. Some are being asked to work a ridiculous number of hours every week. Others fear that they're about to lose their jobs or have already lost them. These things are a distraction for us, and they make us less fruitful than we would otherwise be. Once again, that's understandable, but it's not excusable. Furthermore, once the devil figures out that those distractions make us weak, do you think he's going to leave that area of our lives alone? Of course not! He's going to pile temptation and worry on us until we collapse. In fact, there are Christians who are members of this congregation right now who have such bad thorn problems that they're on the verge of falling away. The only way for us to deal with our thorns is to rip them out by the roots. We need to put Christ first in our lives, and anything that keeps Him from being first has to go.

Finally, we need to look to be fruitful in our interactions with **ONE ANOTHER**. The Hebrews writer explores this concept in Hebrews 3:12-13. There are a number of Christians in this congregation who are in terrible spiritual trouble, and if they are ever restored, it won't be because the elders did something. It won't be because I did something. It will be because the ordinary Christians in the pews reached out to them and wouldn't let them fall away. Some of the brethren here are doing a bang-up job at that. Most are not. We're too caught up in our own busy schedules to spare the time our dying brethren need, and that's a shame. We need to change that before it's too late for them and us.