

FIRST THINGS, Part 2

First Love

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If we consider what are the “first things” that God asks of us, we must recognize that they are not merely first in order, but they are the *first in importance*, whether at the beginning, or the middle, or near the end of our journey with Him.

Our primary pursuit must be: “*Seek the Kingdom of God and live righteously.*” (Matthew 6:33) As we unpack this concept further today, we will learn how this is done.

Return and Recover

NIV Revelation 2:1 “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: ² 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. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵ 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.

Notice that Jesus did not say, “You lost your first love.” He said, “You *left* it...” God did not turn His back on you; *you* wandered away from Him. “How? In what way?” you ask.

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

“You don’t love me or each other as you did at first!”

Can you remember how Jesus’ love overwhelmed you at the first? How you loved Him at the beginning? Do you remember your eagerness to meet with the church for worship? And the fervor of your praises? Do you remember your enthusiasm in prayer, though you stumbled through it? And your readiness to help out in any church endeavor? Do you remember how great it felt to forgive people who had wronged you in the past? How freeing!

Where is that zeal and energy today?

Did you trade it for bitterness? Have you burnt out? Have you become disheartened?

I assure you, God understands what you’ve been through and how you feel today. And, He stands ready to cleanse you, heal you, restore you. He has the power that is necessary, but you have to *choose to change*. Once you make that choice, God’s mercy and grace will flow to you abundantly.

That choice is called “repentance.” You probably didn’t create the circumstances that threw you, but you responded to them without trusting God and that made you bitter. Or you pursued your calling without leaning on God and others and burnt yourself out. Or you believed that circumstances indicated that God had ceased loving you and you lost heart.

It's not *easy* following Jesus Christ. He leads us through places we did not want or intend to go. But it is *real* and it is *good*, for He leads us ultimately to green meadows and peaceful streams, if we follow Him all the way.

This is the essence of all that He commands of us.

One Thing Is Needed

One of the scribes (teachers of the Law of Moses) asked Jesus, "*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*"

Mark 12:29 Jesus replied, "*The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord.'*³⁰ *And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.'*³¹ *The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* *No other commandment is greater than these.*"

Jesus went right to the heart of the law: the Sh'mah. "*And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might*" (Deuteronomy 6:5). The Jews knew this was the Great Commandment. Orthodox Jews wrote it out and put it in their mezuzahs—the small, elongated boxes they fastened to their front doorposts. They wrote it out and put it in their phylacteries—the leather pouches they wore on their foreheads in obedience to the command to keep the Word always on their minds. Thus, it would have been no surprise that Jesus named the Sh'mah as the greatest commandment. But then He went on... He said there was a second commandment that was *equally important*. In other words, the First and Second Commandments are inextricably linked together.

Some have suggested that this means that in order to love our neighbor, we must first love ourselves. I don't believe that is what Jesus has said.

Do you remember the words of Jesus that I shared last Sunday? He contrasted the way Christians should think with the way non-believers think. Their thoughts are dominated by self-centered concerns: what they will eat, what they will drink, and what they will wear. This is normal and natural, but it is not Spirit-led thinking. Christ-followers will also think those thoughts, but those thoughts will not *dominate* their minds. Instead, the Holy Spirit will prompt them to think of others' needs as well, and prominently.

I believe Jesus is saying, "Just as you already love yourself, care for yourself, and think about yourself, you are to love your neighbor in the same way."

God-Dependent

You see, according to 1 John 4:20, loving my neighbor is not dependent upon loving myself. It is dependent upon loving God.

1 John 4:20 *If someone says, "I love God," but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?*²¹ *And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their Christian brothers and sisters.*

It is my love for God that prompts me to put the needs of others' above my own needs. It is my love for God that prompts me to share what I have. God so loved that He gave... therefore, when I love much, I also give. If I don't care for others, I don't really love God at all.

The ability to love God and to love people are inextricably linked. The problem is, most of us separate the two because of our “TV-dinner spirituality.” In a TV-dinner, the fried chicken, vegetables, and mashed potatoes are all in separate compartments. And that’s how we tend to live our lives: in separate compartments.

“I love God,” we say. “I’m going to worship with the church on Sunday.” But on Monday we call our boss an idiot behind his back, on Wednesday we complain about how our neighbor idles his car too early in the morning, and on Saturday, when we learn that another church member’s son was arrested for drunkenness, we cluck our tongue and think, “That kid was never any good.” Yet Sunday finds us worshipping the Lord once again.

We compartmentalize our lives, thinking that how we treat people has little to do with our relationship with God.

Jesus says our walk with Him is not a TV-dinner, but a chicken pot pie. No longer compartmentalized, the vegetables, potatoes, and chicken will all be mixed together. If we really love God, we’ll inevitably love people. In fact, if our love for God is genuine, it will naturally flow into a love for others.

The Sum of All Things

The message of the Law and the Prophets, indeed the message of the entire Old Testament is summed up in one activity: loving. That is why Jesus said, “Love the Lord and love your neighbor and in so doing, you will exemplify the essence of all Old Testament teaching.”

I love the picture Jesus painted when He said that all the Law and the writings of the prophets hang on loving God and loving our neighbor. As I look to heaven and love God; and as I look to my right and left and love people, I become the picture of a cross. On these two pegs hang all the Law and the Prophets.

Who hung on the Cross? The One who loved His Father with all of His heart and soul, mind and strength; the One who loved us and gave Himself for us. Jesus is the Perfect One who loves His Father and who loves us.

If you want to *be* right, follow Him. If you want to *do* right, love as He loved.