

It's Time To Bring Back Love As The Church's Brand

Series: *The Greatest of Theses...*

1 Corinthians 13:13; Revelation 2:1-7

May 20, 2018

Well, thanks again for being here today. It's been a great day.

There is an African proverb that says, "If you want to walk fast, walk alone. But if you want to walk far, walk together." This is a great proverb because it speaks to the power of community over the efforts of the individual. And it's especially true when it comes to changing the world. None of us are meant to go it alone.

God has wisely chosen to organize His followers into communities – churches – to carry out His purposes in the world. Starting with Jesus' 12 disciples, and continuing with us today, churches are the outposts of God's kingdom.

When I read the book of Acts, I'm inspired by the example of the 1st century church coming to life. With preaching, teaching and prayer, the early Christians also paid special attention to the needs within their community, including the widows, the elderly and the poor.

The early believers lived and loved with such power that God's glory spread like wildfire. They broke with the status quo by prioritizing people over possessions. They regarded resources as coming from God, to be used for God's purposes – including to care for the needy, whom God loves.

In Acts 4, we read:

*All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had. The apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's great blessing was upon them all. There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.*¹

These brothers and sisters in Christ lived harmoniously together, breaking bread in each other's homes and sharing everything while praising God. Their way of life was radically different, an attractive alternative to every other model of human community. It's no wonder that this appealed to nonbelievers, with the effect that "... daily the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved."²

In the time of Acts, Christianity was spreading, but what happened later during desperate times threw gasoline on the fire.

When a plague struck the Roman Empire in the 3rd century, killing as many as 5,000 people a day, you can imagine people's panic. The common and understandably human impulse was self-preservation – banish the sick in hopes of avoiding contagion.

Christians didn't do that. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria recorded their heroic actions: "Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy, for they were infected by others with the disease ..."

¹ Acts 4:32-35 (NLT2)

² Acts 2:47 (NLT2)

This countercultural faith in action helped win over many Gentiles, contributing to the astonishing growth of Christianity from about 5,000 followers in the time of Acts 2 to as many as 33 million people 200 years later.³

By serving those no one else served and embracing those whom society discarded, Christians reflected the character of Christ. Tertullian, a 3rd century Christian author, observed, “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’” Love was their brand. Love was their brand.

When you think of companies or products, if you know anything about them, you immediately have an impression, a reaction to who and what they do. For example, what is the first thing that comes to mind when I say “Krogers”? Yeah food, but so does Meijers or Sam’s Club or Aldis? What is it about Krogers that makes it different than the others?

How about another one? How about Rolex? Yeah, it’s a watch, but what about its brand?

What about United Airlines?

Now, what about the church? What is its brand?

I contend that it’s time to bring back “love” as the church’s brand, as the thing people think of when they talk about the church, and especially our church.

If love is not our brand, isn’t what people think of when they think of the church, let’s change that. In the name of Christ, we can stand for love, in the gap for the unwanted, the unwelcome, the unloved. Ours can be the community of believers that provoke people to exclaim, “Look how they love!”

The Book of Revelation was written to seven churches in western Turkey. It was a vision from God to the Apostle John on the island of Patmos to encourage, strengthen, and yes correct the churches as the day of terrible tribulation approached. Each of the seven churches received a little note from Jesus Himself.

I want to look at one of those notes, the personal letter to the church at Ephesus. So, look at page 6 in your bulletin as I read from Revelation 2:1-7:

READ REVELATION 2:1-7.

Ephesus was a great church. Paul himself founded it and spent 2 years as its pastor. The apostle John was also there as was Jesus’ mother Mary. John was exiled from Ephesus to Patmos. So, when he received the Revelation, he had to be both happy and sad at what Jesus had to say.

READ REVELATION 2:2-3.

But after the Lord pats them on the back, He makes a transition. Verse 4:

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

Wow. That had to hurt. “You have forsaken your first love.” Something had gone wrong. The earnest toil was there; the gallant endurance was there; the unimpeachable orthodoxy was there; but now the love was gone.⁵ It once was there; Paul had once commended the church at Ephesus for its love for God and others.⁶

³ According to Rodney Stark in “The Rise of Christianity”

⁴ Revelation 2:4 (NIV)

⁵ Barclay’s Daily Study Bible, Revelation 2:1-7

⁶ “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints” (Ephesians 1:15, NIV)

What does Jesus mean “they lost their first love?” Just as when a man and woman fall in love, so also new believers rejoice at their newfound relationship with God. We love God and we love everyone. But when we lose sight of the seriousness of sin, we begin to lose the thrill of our forgiveness⁷ and our love for God diminishes. To be a Christian means to love God and those God loves with all that you are.⁸

To the Ephesians though, they had become cold, methodical remnants of what they were. While their theology and moral purity were good, their diminished zeal for truly living for the love of God had been forsaken

When we allow ourselves as Christians to get into a “routine” of just doing and not being, we run the risk of losing our first love, which ought to be Christ. Three things happen when we have forsaken our first love.

First, We find little or no time for Jesus on a daily basis.

Before we do anything for the Lord; we ought to first be reading His Word and praying.

In Psalm 119, the Psalmist wrote these things:

How I delight in your commands! How I love them! I honor and love your commands. I meditate on your decrees.⁹

Your instructions are more valuable to me than millions in gold and silver.¹⁰

I rise early, before the sun is up; I cry out for help and put my hope in your words.¹¹

In 7th grade, I began daily reading my Bible with all sincerity. It was my source not only for the knowledge of the Lord, but my help through the difficult trials of being a Christian and a teenage. I needed the comfort and guidance it gave. And as I have read Scripture, I grow in my love for God.

Daily Scripture and prayer is like meat in our diet, and when we don't meditate on the word of God and pray, then we are spiritually starving ourselves. And as a result, we lose our first love, or as the song goes, “You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling.”

Second, when we have forsaken our first love, We shift our eyes from love to judgment.

We have been studying love for the last few weeks. We know how important love. We remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:13:

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.¹²

Faith is amazing; it can move mountains.¹³ Hope allows us to face the worst things of life, even death, with the assurance of the promises of God.¹⁴ Yet love is greatest of them all.

But without love, we become judgmental. When we lose love like the Ephesians did, the passion we once had for Christ is replaced by legalism or by self-righteousness.

⁷ See 2 Peter 1:9

⁸ See Mark 11:30-31

⁹ Psalm 119:47-48 (NLT2)

¹⁰ Psalm 119:72 (NLT2)

¹¹ Psalm 119:147 (NLT2)

¹² 1 Corinthians 13:13 (NIV)

¹³ See Matthew 17:20; 1 Corinthians 13:2

¹⁴ See Proverbs 14:32; Colossians 1:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 6:18-19.

I believe one of the greatest stories in Scripture is the one about the religious leaders bringing to Jesus the woman caught in the very act of adultery. There she was ashamed, fearing for her life as her accusers said that she deserved to be stoned to death... and she knew it. But what did Jesus do? He bent down to write in the dirt. Now, had this sin affected Him? Indeed it had because the Father and the Son hate sin. But they also love the sinner, so much so that even when pressed, Jesus continued to write, then finally stood up and said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."¹⁵ Then He stooped down and wrote some more. When all the accusers had departed in the stark reality of their own sin, only one remained to be the woman's accuser – Jesus – and He said, "Go now and leave your life of sin."¹⁶

Love filled Jesus' heart; He had every right to judge that woman, but He didn't. He loved. When we forsake our first love, love is replaced by judgment. We don't care about people anymore. Instead, we place ourselves on the judicial bench of life just like the religious leaders, and we have "...Lost that Lovin' Feeling."

Finally, when we have forsaken our first love, We fail to share our witness to a lost world.

The church at Ephesus started out strong, but over time, things had begun to change. While they had remained faithful to the Word of God, and had endured hardship, the likes of which most of us could not understand, something was lacking. They had lost their passion; they had lost their fervor for Christ. The passionate love that had motivated them and burned within their hearts had given way to a mechanical orthodoxy, a ritualistic form of service that lacked enthusiasm and zeal. They now found themselves simply going through the motions with a mechanical form of Christianity that demonstrates all the externals, but lacks the internal passion the once stirred our hearts and moved us to love for Christ.

- We are unwilling to give all we are and all we have to Jesus.
- We are unwilling to be inconvenienced for Christ
- We do not tithe, because that might deny us some of the material things that make our life more comfortable.
- We do not witness, for that would cause others to think we were fanatical.
- We are more willing to give our time, energy, money to a sporting event or some sort of entertainment, then we are to the things of God.
- Life for us is about self-advancement – no longer about the Kingdom of God.

And we wonder why they have no spiritual power. We wonder why we have not sensed the presence of God in our life for a mighty long time. Yes, my brothers and sisters, "You've Lost That Loving Feeling."

It is a dangerous thing to go through the motions of Christianity without a passionate love for Christ. Do you know what happened to the church at Ephesus? Today the ruins of that ancient city lie under the muck and mire of a swamp. The Church at Ephesus died, and the city died around it, just like Jesus said would happen.¹⁷

The truth of the matter is that a church is made up of individuals. The passion of the church will never be any greater than the collective passion of her members. If we

¹⁵ John 8:7 (NIV)

¹⁶ John 8:11 (NIV)

¹⁷ See Revelation 2:5

are on fire for Christ, that passion will be reflected in our church. If we grow cold in our love for Jesus, that coldness will be evident in our fellowship.

The Lord said to the Church of Ephesus, "You've Lost That Loving Feeling." Let us make sure we have a healthy, sincere love for the Lord. Let us make sure our passion is for the Lord. Let us make sure we have a love affair with the Lord. Let us make sure we are the Church the Lord is coming back to redeem.

It's time to bring back love as the church's brand.