

Affection for Christ - Its Awakening, Decline, and Revival

by C.A. Coates

The sermon emphasizes the importance of maintaining a deep and holy affection for Christ, and the role of the Lord's restoring grace in bringing backsliding people to the first love.

Scripture: Hosea 2:6, Hosea 2:14-15, 2 Corinthians 11:1, Revelation 2:2

Topics: "Christ's Affection", "Holy Spirit"

Description

C.A. Coates preaches about the importance of maintaining affection for Christ, emphasizing the need for the hidden spring of affections that satisfy Christ's heart above all else. The true evangelist seeks a present result for Christ, desiring a people whose affections are solely for Him. The sermon delves into the significance of being saved not just for heaven but for the heart of Christ now, highlighting the interval between the cross and glory marked by Satan's hindrances and the Holy Spirit's work for a present result for Christ.

Transcript

2 Corinthians 11:1-3.

The subject before me is affection for Christ, or the state of heart which the Spirit is here to produce in the saints, and by which they answer to the present thoughts of Christ. I am afraid that when we speak of being here for Christ it is often the thought of our service or conduct that is prominent; therefore it is well to be reminded that there is something over which Christ is more jealous than He is over our conduct or our service. It is that "garden enclosed", that "spring shut up", that "fountain sealed", from which all others but Himself are excluded - the hidden spring of those affections which alone satisfy His heart, or render conduct and service acceptable to Him.

This is strikingly expressed in the words we have just read, where we see the object of the true evangelist. He is bent upon a present result for Christ. He is not anxious to have a number of converts whom he can count as his own; he is not thinking of himself, but of his Master; he wants those whom he can present "as a chaste virgin to Christ". It is not that he loses sight of the eternal result, but the immediate object on which his heart is set, and for which he longs with intense fervency, is a present result in a people whose affections are altogether for Christ. "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ".

This is a great object before the heart of God at the present time - to have a people saved not only from judgment and the lake of fire, but from the world; saved not only for heaven by-and-by, but for the heart of Christ now. The work of Christ on the cross has settled every question that sin raised between God and our souls, and the future is bright with the glory of God, into which we shall be brought according to all the value of that work. But there is another thing, and that is the interval between the cross and the glory - an interval marked, so far as this world is concerned, by the dishonour and rejection of Christ. Satan cannot touch the value of the work of the cross, nor can he mar the perfection of the eternal glory, but the whole force of his power is put forth to hinder a present result for Christ. On the other hand, all the energy of the Holy Ghost is active to produce a present result for Christ. Every believer is looking to be to the satisfaction and joy of Christ in the eternal future; and surely none of us would like to say that we did not care whether we were to His satisfaction now or not; yet, alas! practically it very often comes to this.

A verse from Jeremiah 2 may help us to see in an old Testament type when the soul may be looked upon as espoused unto Christ. "Thus saith the Lord, I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the Lord, and the firstfruits of his increase". I have no doubt these words refer to the time when the children of Israel were brought through the Red Sea. They were brought into the joy of complete deliverance from the power of the oppressor and from the land of judgment. Jehovah Himself became everything to them - their strength, their song, and their salvation; His victory and glory, and His thoughts and purposes, filled their hearts. They were absorbed with Himself. The song in Exodus 15 is all "Thou", "Thy", "Thee", "Thine"; if they speak of themselves it is as "Thy people". It was a wonderful moment. You may say that it did not last long. That is true; but think of the wonderful blessedness of it while it did last. It was what Jehovah could remember and speak of more than 800 years later as "the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals".

Such a moment has come in the history of every soul who knows the salvation of God. Perhaps it was some time after you were converted; you may have been under the shelter of the blood for years before you came to it; but there is a moment - never to be forgotten - when Christ risen comes before the soul, and the greatness of His victory, and the share we have in it, and the wonderful purposes of God for us - all secured by that victory - take possession of the heart. We are brought to One who has been raised again for our justification, and through Him we find ourselves clear of the judgment land and the oppressor's power. There is no sense of need in the soul that is in the presence of Christ risen; there is a sense of boundless favour, for the soul is conscious (though it might not know how to explain it) that we share in the victory as belonging to the One who has won it. Through Him we have access into favour. But the soul who has come to this is not thinking so much of the favour or blessing as a thing in itself, but as that which we have in connection with Him, and as belonging to Him. If I belong to Him, the more wonderful His victory and position the more wonderful mine is, but I think of it all as His. I don't think we rightly get a sense of belonging to Him until we come to Him as the Risen One, but I believe every heart that knows Him as risen from the dead has the consciousness, 'I belong to Him'. I believe Thomas had it when he said, "My Lord and my God". I am not speaking of knowing truths or doctrines at all, but of a consciousness in the soul that has really reached Christ risen. I believe that to be the moment of the soul's espousal unto Christ. There may be much to learn, but there is great affection for Christ. All the wealth and wisdom of Egypt would not have tempted back at that moment those who sang the song, "Israel was holiness unto Jehovah". ...

I trust many of you understand the blessedness of a moment when Christ is really known by the heart outside everything here in the infinite greatness of His own triumph, and you are conscious that you share in it all because you belong to Him. I venture to say that at such a moment the offer of 1,000 pounds a year would have very little power to attract your heart. You had found a Person outside everything here, who was infinitely more to your heart than all the things of earth. You had stepped on to the shore of a new world, and found yourself supremely happy there, and the old world was totally eclipsed and superseded. It was the kindness of your youth and the love of your espousals. There was One whom, not having seen, ye loved, and in whom, though ye saw Him not, yet believing, ye rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory. The vain things that had charmed you were forgotten or only remembered with shame, and you gladly accepted a part in the rejection of Christ here, because of the satisfaction you had found in Him on the other side. I trust many of you have known the reality of such a moment in your history. Now that is the true beginning of a Christian, and the Spirit of God is jealous over us that these affections should be maintained in freshness and fervency in our souls. It is thus - and only thus - that Christ has His true satisfaction in us, for if the day of espousal yields deep and holy joy to us, it yields a deeper and a fuller joy to Him, whose matchless love has drawn forth the responsive affection of our hearts. It is "the day of his espousals, the day of the gladness of his heart" (Song of Solomon 3:11).

We can easily understand that if the devil has succeeded in turning Christ out of this world, it will be no pleasure to him to see a people here to whose hearts Christ is everything. Therefore it is his great object to corrupt our minds from simplicity as to the Christ; and this he seeks to accomplish, not by an open attack upon Christ, but "as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety". He had introduced among the saints at Corinth men who pretended to be apostles of Christ, and had all the appearance of ministers of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:12-15). These men were going about amongst the saints discrediting Paul, and under a great show of doing the Lord's work they were craftily bringing in fleshly and worldly principles, and so far as they were accepted and tolerated, the saints' minds were corrupted from simplicity as to the Christ. I daresay they were careful not to assail the foundation truths. The devil knows better than to put in the thick edge of the wedge first. it would not do for them to show their colours openly at first; but everything would be modified, and more or less humanized, and stripped of its proper force and hearing. ...

We cannot be too careful as to the influences which we allow to act upon us. We are affected by all that we hear and by all that we read - unconsciously it may be. The damage is done before we know it; like Ephraim, we have grey hairs and know it not. ... I am quite sure that a man cannot soak his mind in a newspaper every morning and retain freshness of affection for Christ. Of course a man in business may have to look at the market price of timber, or stone, or corn, just as a Christian slave in the apostle's days might have had to go down to the market on his master's business; but you may be sure that the Christian slave who knew what it was to be espoused to Christ would turn away as quickly as possible from the tumult of the market and the idle gossip of the street, and the harangue of the political orator would have little charm for his ear. Some have said, "But I can hear and read things without being damaged by them if I do not allow them to have a place in my heart". A very pertinent question for such persons would be, "What gain is there in occupying the mind with so much that is acknowledged to be unworthy of the heart"? But it is precisely in this way that the heart is drawn aside. The mind - the thoughts - are turned to things here, and the affections soon follow in the same direction. Nor is it a question if the actual retention in the memory of the things that are heard or read, but of the impression that is made on the mind, and the cast that is given to the thoughts by them. The mind is turned back to things here, and the speedy result of this is that the whole-hearted affection to which Christ was everything is lost, and perhaps soon regarded

as only a temporary excitement of no practical value. Ah! the Lord looks back to those hours of holy joy, of absorbing affection, of burning love; and He says, "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals". Eight hundred years had passed in Israel's history - long centuries of backsliding and rebellion but the Lord never forgot the brief moment in which He was everything to their hearts. How far has He to look back to find such a moment in your history or mine?

Then there is another thing. "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13). In the East a man sometimes spends years hewing out a cistern in the rocks, hoping to get it filled in the rainy season, that he may have a supply for the time of drought. At last the rains descend, the streams rush into the mouth of the cistern, but the water-level does not rise - the water runs out as fast as it runs in - it is a broken cistern. What a disappointment! The man has two counts to the bad - he has wasted all his labour, and he is dry. That is God's picture of a man whose heart has been turned away from Christ. You are looking to find the present satisfaction of your heart in earthly things, but, depend on it, sooner or later you will find that all your cisterns here are "broken". What a solemn thing to have to look back at the end on a wasted life! How sad to be dry with such a Fountain near!

I will now turn to one or two scriptures which bring before us the ways of the Lord in His restoring grace, when the hearts of His own have got away from Him. And in connection with this I may say that we are as dependent on the Lord for restoration when we wander, as we were at the beginning for salvation. How sweet to know that He does not, and will not, give us up. The secret of all His gracious dealings with us lies in the fact that He loves us, and nothing but love will satisfy love. He is jealous over us; He must have the affection of our hearts; He values it; it is the chosen satisfaction of His love.

In bringing about restoration the Lord makes use of two great agencies - Ministry and Government; or to put it in simpler words, He reaches us by His voice or by His hand. I am not forgetting His advocacy with the Father, for this lies behind it all. He takes up our whole case with the Father before there is a movement of restoring grace towards us, or any response to that movement in our souls. That advocacy, which is in all the value of His own nearness to the Father and based upon His sin-atoning work, is the unfailing outcome of His love. Our sin becomes the immediate occasion for His love to concern itself on our behalf, and this with the Father. Then, consequent upon this perfect and prevailing advocacy, there is the activity of His restoring grace toward us, and it is of this that I now speak.

"I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have against thee, that thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen; and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (Revelation 2:2-5). Here we have ministry, or the Lord's voice, addressing itself to those whose hearts had left their first love, and seeking to call them to repentance. How solemn is the picture here! We see an assembly that was apparently in the most perfect outward order, and in which was found an extraordinary measure of faithfulness and spiritual energy, yet lacking the one thing which alone could satisfy the heart of Christ. No human eye might have been able to discern that anything was lacking; there was service, fidelity, suffering for Christ's name's sake, and endurance of no ordinary kind. If we knew such an assembly we should probably think they were everything that could be desired. But the love of their espousals had waned; they had left the bright "first love" to which Christ Himself was everything. Alas! it is possible for our service, our fidelity, and our testimony for Christ to become

prominent in our minds, and for these things, so excellent in themselves, to usurp the place which CHRIST longs to hold in our affections. It may have been so at Ephesus, for Satan will use even such things as these to corrupt our minds from simplicity as to the Christ, and it is often thus that the decline of affection begins.

How touching is that word, "Remember from whence thou art fallen". We have already seen how the Lord remembers the "first love" of His saints; He delights to call it to mind; and He counts upon it being also a sweet memory to the hearts of His own. This is the first effort of His restoring grace - to recall the memory of those precious hours when the holy rapture of "first love" filled the heart, and He was really everything to the soul. Are the best and brightest seasons of your soul's history somewhere far behind? Have you to look back through the mist of intervening years to find a moment of deep joy in which Christ filled the whole vision of your soul, and His love satisfied every longing of your heart? Sorrowfully, but in tender love, the Lord calls you now to "remember". Do not allow yourself to be deceived by the fact that you know more, and that many truths are clearer to your mind. This may be so, while the affections wither, and the soul is as dry as the desert sand. May the voice of the Lord really reach and recall in power every heart that has left its first love.

"And repent". I think there is immense grace in that word. It opens the door for the aroused heart to trace its way back to the point where the decline began. It is, so to speak, the Lord inviting us to return to the happiness and intimacy of "first love". It is sad and humbling that the Lord has to use such a word to His own, but there is precious grace and comfort in it for the exercised heart. Instead of putting any difficulty or discouragement in the way of our return, He invites us - calls upon us - to retrace our steps. Yet we must needs return in a way that really sets us free in the presence of His love from the things that had diverted us from Him. Hence He says "Repent". It is by the judgment in His presence of the whole course by which our hearts have wandered that we are brought back to the point where the decline began. The soul has to travel back over its course, and to judge in the presence of the Lord the true character of the things that have turned it aside, and in doing so to judge itself for the condition which gave these things their power over it. This is a deep, solemn, searching process, but infinite love calls us into it, and will carry us through it if we respond to that call. I can quite understand a backslider saying, But my course has been so crooked and intricate that I could never trace it out; and the beginnings of my decline were so subtle, and the stages of it so imperceptible that I am quite at a loss. This may serve to prove to you that you cannot restore yourself. The Lord alone can lead us back over the history of our souls, and if our hearts really turn to Him He will do it. He can show us exactly what turned us aside, and what it was that prepared us to be turned aside, and He can give us His own judgment about it all. There is no legal effort about this, but the soul sitting down before the Lord to judge with Him the whole course of departure. The result of it is that we are brought back, with a deepened knowledge of self and a truer judgment of the world, to find our entire satisfaction in the unchanging love of His heart. We are brought back to the freshness and simplicity of that "first love" to which Christ is everything.

But there is another agency employed by the Lord to reach the consciences and hearts of His backsliding people, and that is Government. To bring this before you I will read from the Old Testament. "Therefore, behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths. And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now" (Hosea 2:6,7). Here we see the movement of the Lord's hand in restoring grace. He will not allow the backslider to go unchecked in his self-chosen way; He hedges it up with thorns, and builds a wall across it.

Do not our hearts know something of this? We thought to take a seemingly pleasant path, but Christ was not before our hearts when we entered it, and every step in it was taking us further from Him, and in His grace He put a hedge of thorns across it. He allowed our path to land us in painful circumstances, and the thorns tore our flesh. Did we consider that it was restoring grace which thus hedged up our way? Then again, we thought we saw a straight, smooth way before us; it fell in with our wishes, our judgment approved it, and we entered on it with the greatest assurance. But presently we came to a dead block; there was a wall right across the road, and we could neither get over it nor round it. Ah! it was restoring grace which built that wall, and which seeks to remind us by it that Christ was not before us when we turned that way.

Have you ever pursued an object without any success, and been mortified by the disappointment? Or, having obtained the desired end, found it very different from what you had expected? Have you never sought gratification in things here, and been surprised that they yielded so little? You have followed without overtaking; you have sought without finding. You have been proving that the cisterns here are broken and can hold no water. Does not the dealing of the Lord's hand with you constrain you to say, "I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now"?

Let us read further. "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:14). If our affections are true to Christ, they will make this world a wilderness to us; but if our affections do not make it a wilderness, His government will. He loves us too well to allow our hearts to nestle here; and He makes us conscious that it is a wilderness that He may have opportunity in our loneliness and our sorrow to speak to our hearts. The Voice that could not be heard in the din and bustle, and amid the laughter of the city, can be heard in the silence and solitude of the wilderness. Have you never had a wilderness interview with the Lover of your soul?

Then further. "And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope" (Hosea 2:15). How significant is this! The valley of Achor (trouble) was the place where Achan was stoned, and he and his family, and his ill-gotten spoil, were burned with fire. This is very remarkable, for the sin of Achan was the first movement of departure after the people got into the land, and the place where that first movement was so thoroughly judged is the place given as a "door of hope" for a backsliding people. Does it not again impress upon our hearts the solemn and imperative necessity of judging the root and secret cause of the first symptom of decline. It is the allowance of the flesh - the toleration of its tastes and tendencies - which is the root of all. We allow ourselves to be swayed by a man who thinks more of a "goodly Babylonish garment", or a little silver or gold, than he does of Christ. You may depend upon it that if Christ loses His place in our affections, we are henceforth controlled either by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life. May the Lord conduct each backsliding heart through the valley of Achor, and give each one a thorough root-judgment of the flesh and the world.

A few words more. "And she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she me up out of the land of Egypt. ... And I will betroth thee unto me for ever. ... I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord" (Hosea 2:15,19,20). What a triumph of grace! Poor backsliding Israel, after more than 3,000 years of wandering and rebellion, will be brought back to the kindness of her youth, and to the love of her espousals. She will know Jehovah in His infinite grace as she has never known Him before - no longer as her Master, but as her Husband (see verse 16) - and she will enter afresh and for ever into the joy of her betrothal to Him. Beloved brethren, if this is the manner of His grace to Israel, surely our hearts are entitled to appropriate its sweetness to ourselves, who are called, through infinite love, to know Him in a closer relationship. I know that when the heart has long been a stranger to

the joy of first love, there is a great tendency to settle down and go on with things as they are, as though it were hopeless to expect to be restored. I am sure that if the Lord gives your heart a fresh consciousness that He really loves you, that despairing and depressing idea will be banished from your soul. You will awake to the blessed reality of the fact that He yearns over you in rich and boundless love, and that He is ready to lead you into communion with Himself in the judgment of the things that have turned you aside, and of yourself for giving them a place in your thoughts. Your heart will leap for joy to think that His love is really unchanged. Thus restored, "first love", with all that it means for you and for Him, will again fill your heart. You will sing as in the days of your youth. You will come back with a subdued and chastened spirit - with a humbled heart and a broken will - to the joy of that moment of espousal when Christ was everything to your heart.

O Lord, Thy love's unbounded -

So sweet, so full, so free

My soul is all transported,

Whene'er I think on Thee!

Yet, Lord, alas! what weakness

Within myself I find;

No infant's changing pleasure

Is like my wandering mind.

And yet Thy love's unchanging,

And doth recall my heart

To joy in all its brightness,

The peace its beams impart.

Yet sure, if in Thy presence

My soul still constant were,

Mine eye would, more familiar,

Its brighter glories bear.

And thus, Thy deep perfections

Much better should I know,

And with adoring fervour

In this Thy nature grow.

Still sweet 'tis to discover,

If clouds have dimmed my sight,
When passed, Eternal Lover,
Towards me, as e'er, Thou'rt bright.
O keep my soul, then, Jesus,
Abiding still with Thee,
And if I wander, teach me
Soon back to Thee to flee.
That all Thy gracious favour
May to my soul be known;
And, versed in this Thy goodness,
My hopes Thyself shall crown.

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