

Rev. 2:4-6. First Love Left

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon emphasizes the importance of first love in our relationship with Christ, and warns of the consequences of lost love, including a divided heart and a lack of joy and peace.

Scripture: Revelation 2:4

Topics: "First Love", "Relationship With Christ"

Description

Horatius Bonar preaches on Revelation 2:4-6, emphasizing the profound sorrow of Christ over the church of Ephesus having left its first love. He illustrates how this complaint is not merely a rebuke but a heartfelt expression of disappointment from a loving Savior who desires a deep, affectionate relationship with His followers. Bonar highlights that while the church maintained good works, it lacked the fervent love that should characterize a true relationship with Christ. He calls for a return to that first love, urging believers to rekindle their passion for Christ by reflecting on His unwavering love for them. The sermon serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of love in the Christian faith, above all deeds and actions.

Transcript

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love."--Revelation 2:4.

There are some words which smite like a hammer, or cleave like a thunderbolt--words of mere power and terror--words like those which broke forth in fire from Sinai. But the words of our text are words which drop as the rain, and distill as the dew; words which pierce, yet soften; which rouse, yet soothe; which wound, yet bind up; which combine the biting north wind and the healing south wind. Such are these. They are not the earthquake nor the fire nor the whirlwind, but the still small voice; more resistless than all these together; mingling the rebuke and the consolation; the severity and the love; the father's rod and the mother's tears.

There are words which lead you away from the speaker, and absorb you in themselves. The words of our text are not such. There are others which carry you wholly past themselves to the speaker. Neither are the words of our text such. There are yet other words which divide you between themselves and the speaker, or rather which so engross your whole person with both, that you feel yourself passing continually from the one to the other, as if the eye could not be satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. Such are the words of our text. You have both the picture and the artist, the poem and the poet, so interwoven, that each recalls the other; no, each is seen and heard in the other.

No sooner do we hear these words of the Son of God--so searching, so alarming--than we are carried up to Him who uttered them, and our souls are absorbed in the mingled majesty and grace of the only-begotten of the Father; and while they send us down into the depths, to learn one of the most humbling lessons that was ever taught concerning the weakness, the fickleness, the faithfulness--of a Christian's heart, they carry us upward irresistibly, far above all heavens, to gaze upon the surpassing glory and meditate on the matchless love of Him who died for us, and who rose again!

The words are those of complaint; some would call it fault finding; and, as such, might have repelled us from the complainer. But such is the nature and tone of the complaint, that we feel attracted, not repelled; humbled, but not hurt nor affronted; made to blush, and yet not chilled nor estranged--no, rather drawn more closely to a friend so affectionate and faithful. The reproof is keen, yet it casts no shadow on the grace of the reprover--rather does it magnify that grace into sevenfold brightness, by embodying in the admonition an utterance of the most generous, the most profound, yet, as we may call it, the most sorrowful affection that the world has ever seen!

Next in tenderness to the tears shed over Jerusalem by the Son of God in the days of His flesh, is this outflow of 'disappointed love' over the estrangement of Ephesus, given vent to upon His throne above. It is not weeping. No! that cannot be, now when from His face all tears have been forever wiped away! But it is akin to this--it is the nearest thing to it that we can imagine--it is that which would have been tears anywhere else than in the heaven of heavens.

But the preface to the complaint claims special notice; for that complaint does not stand alone--it is a gem set in fine gold, and the verse which introduce it are as marvelous as itself. And what strikes us most in it, is the minute enumeration of services performed by this church, as if the speaker were most unwilling to come to the matter of complaint, to touch the jarring string; being desirous of recounting all the good deeds and faithful services of the church before He speak the words of censure. 'I know your works and your labor, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear those who are evil--and you have tried those who say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars--and have borne, and have patience, and for my name's sake have labored, and have not fainted.'

What an introduction to the 'Nevertheless I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love!' How fitted to disarm all risings of anger; to anticipate and smooth down the offence-taking that might have been stirred; to make Ephesus feel that He who was complaining was complaining in love, not exaggerating the evil, but much more disposed to dwell upon the good; that He was no austere man, no hard master, no censorious fault-finder--but loving and generous, possessed to the uttermost of that love which is "patient and kind; which seeks not her own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil; rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and never fails."

But it is not the mere recital of His servant's good deeds that so strikes us--it is His manifest appreciation of these, His delight in them, His grateful sense of the service rendered. Faults there would be in these labors--but He sees none. Imperfections in the endurances of trial--but He makes mention of none. He speaks as one full of gratitude for favors conferred. He weighs the works, and finds them not lacking. He names His servant's name, and is not ashamed to confess him. He points not merely to the cup of cold water--but to the toil and the testimony and the faithful discipline--commending them, rejoicing in them, thanking His servant for them.

And not until He has done all this, and shown how well He remembers and appreciates each act of happy service, does He come in with the complaint, 'Nevertheless I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love.' What tenderness, what delicacy, what nobleness of love, what divine courtesy--is here! What an honor is put upon our poor doings and endureings for Him, when they are thus so gratefully recounted and so generously commended by the Son of God! What an importance, what a dignity, what a value, is thus affixed to every act, even of the simplest, commonest service for Him!

But our text goes beyond all this. It teaches us His desire for our love, and His disappointment at losing it, or any part of it. It is not so much our labor as our love that He asks; and with nothing less than love can He be satisfied. As God, He claims it; as man, He desires it; as the God-man, He presents to us this mingled claim and longing for love, as that without which He is robbed of His desire and His due. He has not left His real humanity behind Him here in the tomb. He has carried up into heaven His true human heart--with its yearning affections and cravings for love. Neither the Godhead to which that humanity is united, nor His high throne at the Father's right hand, has in the least altered that humanity, or made it less susceptible to love and fellowship. And it is this unchanged and unchangeable manhood that is giving vent to itself in the tender admonition of our text--'You have left they first love.'

It is the language of wounded friendship, complaining of undeserved estrangement. It is the utterance of unrequited love, mourning over the loss of an affection which was better than life. He wants not merely to love--but to be loved. He seemed to have found this at Ephesus--that noble church for which the apostle prayed that it might be rooted and grounded in love, and might know the love that passes knowledge. But the kindness of their youth, the love of their espousals, had passed away. The star grew dim, the flower faded, warm love had cooled, and the Ephesus of the second generation was not the Ephesus of the first. Over this 'lost first love' He mourns, as the gem which of all others He prized the most. And the voice which we hear, sounds like that of Rachel in Ramah weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they are not.

It is not slothful service, or waning zeal, or failing liberality, or slackening warfare, that He complains. His remonstrance rather assumes the existence of much Christian fruitfulness; and even though there had been some failure in labor or endurance, that might have been more easily remedied; nor were these such a necessity to Him who fills all in all. But it is over lost love that He laments; lost love, for which there can be no compensation and no substitute, even to Him; lost love, which cuts so keenly even into the callous heart of man, and leaves such lifelong blanks even in common and inferior souls.

Yet it is not love altogether lost; nor love turned into hatred.

The failure has not got so far as this, nor descended to such a depth. It is of ebbing love He speaks, not love wholly dried up; it is love that has lost the freshness and the edge of other days; love that has sunk below the temperature at which it once stood. This is the substance of the complaint, the burden of His disappointment--the loss of half a heart! So that it would almost seem as if the total drying up would have been more endurable than this ebbing; as if the entire withholding would have been less painful than the stinted giving; as if complete and downright cessation would have been, as in the case of Laodicea, so in that of Ephesus, less hateful than this diminishing, this declining to a lower range of feeling, this grudging gift of a divided heart where once there was entire love.

Strange that the risen Christ, the ascended King, should feel so much the loss of creature-love; that He should be, as one may say, so dependent on our affection; that He should treat this failure not so much as

an affront or a crime, but as a wound and a slight; that He should be touched with the alienation of 'half a heart', and speak of it as a bereavement and a sorrow! Oh, what must be His estimate of love; what must be the value of our love to Him; and what is the honor put on us by a condescension so amazing as this!

A complaint like this coming from any quarter is deeply touching. The wife has ceased to love the husband; the husband has ceased to love the wife; the brother has ceased to love the brother or the sister; the friend has ceased to love the friend--these are complaints which we recognize as real among ourselves, seeing we are so dependent for happiness upon each other's love.

But that a complaint like this should come down from heaven--from Him who has the Father's love and all the love of angels; from Him to whom they sing, in their everlasting songs, 'Blessing and honor and glory and power;' to whom they ascribe 'riches and wisdom and strength,'--is far more profoundly affecting, and appeals to every noble and tender feeling of our nature with irresistible potency. What true hearted man but must be humbled and melted down beneath it?

Why should He love so much--and I so little? Why should He love so truly, so constantly, so warmly--and I return Him nothing but fickleness and insincerity and coldness? Why should He be so concerned about my love, and I so careless about His? Is my love so precious--and His so worthless? Where but in His own infinitely loving and loveable nature can I find a reason for a difference so strange? How marvelous, and how affecting, to hear Him mourn over the 'changed affection' of one of the least of His saints on earth, and to hear Him say, 'I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love?'

What should move Him to desire my love--and to grieve when it is withheld--or when given for a time, and then withdrawn? Has He not love enough in heaven? That 'one pulse in the universe' should beat more feebly--what should that be to the infinite heart above? He who rules that empire on which the sun never sets, need not trouble himself though one worthless subject should renounce allegiance. The ocean does not miss the exhaled drop, nor the forest the faded leaf, nor the sun one wandering ray. Why, then, should He who is King of kings and Lord of lords care so much about the waning love of Ephesus--the loss of the one half of a human heart? Yes! Why should He? Why but because He is love; and because His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor His ways our ways.

He who could utter a complaint like this, and utter it with such manifest sincerity and earnestness, yet with such gentleness and delicacy of tone and word--must be one of whom we cannot know too much. 'I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love,' are the words which embody as precious a revelation of the mind of the ascended Christ as the more explicit announcement--'Unto Him who loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood'--and do they not wonderfully teach us the deep meaning of the old words of the Song of Songs--"Place me like a seal over your heart, or like a seal on your arm. For love is as strong as death, and its jealousy is as enduring as the grave. Love flashes like fire, the brightest kind of flame. Many waters cannot quench love; neither can rivers drown it. If a man tried to buy love with everything he owned, his offer would be utterly despised." (Song 8:6-7)

It was as one who knew both his own heart, and the heart of Him who was claiming it, that old John Berridge wrote these memorable words--"Oh heart, heart, what are you? A mass of fooleries and absurdities! The vainest, foolishest, craftiest, wickedest thing in nature! And yet the Lord Jesus asks me for this heart, woos me for it, died to win it. O incredible love! Adorable condescension! O take it, Lord, and let it be forever closed to all but You!"

But let us follow out a little further this divine rebuke--this touching remonstrance--

"You have left your first love!"--And for what reason? Did the coldness begin on my side or on yours? Have I been to you a wilderness or a land of darkness? What iniquity or unkindness have you found in me, to justify your change? Can you point to one word or deed of mine as an excuse for the withdrawal of your heart? Have I become less lovable, less loving?

"You have left your first love!"--And what or whom have you substituted? Has your power of loving ceased, and your heart become contracted? Or is there some 'second love' that has usurped the place of the first? Is it the WORLD that has thus come in? Is it pleasure? Is it literature or science? Is it business? Is it politics? Is it the creature in some of its various forms, and with the seductive glitter of its many-faceted beauty? What, oh what, is the equivalent for a lost first love? And is there in this new, this second love--a satisfying substitute, a sufficient compensation to your soul for a loss so infinite? To one who has looked upon 'Jerusalem', what is there in Egypt or Babylon, in Rome or in Athens, to admire? To one who has got a glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem, what is there in all the splendor of earth to attract or satisfy? He whose eyes have seen the King in His beauty (if ever he lowers his love to any baser object) must bear about with him an aching heart, and an uneasy dissatisfied eye.

"You have left your first love!"--And what have you gained by the leaving? What has this strange turn of 'capricious affection' done for you? Has it made you a happier, holier, truer, stronger, more noble, more earnest man? Has it disarmed the world's enmity? Has it conciliated the devil? Has it nerved you for the battle with the principalities and powers of hell? Has this scattering over a hundred objects--of affections that were formerly centered upon me--brought with it enlargement and liberty--an increase of joy and peace? Ah! Ask your hearts what your gain has been? A few indulgences which once you did not dare to venture on. A few mirthful smiles of worldly companionship. A few pleasures, for which, until your first love had gone--you had no relish. A more unrestrained enjoyment of the things which perish with the using--a keener appetite for trifles and frivolities, for foolish talking and jesting--a contentment with religious forms, and names, and words, and creeds, and doctrines--a wider sympathy with fashion and vanity--less decision and more compromise--weaker recoil from the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life--growing desire for reunion with a present evil world, in its amusements and tastes, its revelings and banquetings, its self-pleasing, its flesh-pleasing, its love of show and costly attire.

These are some of the things for which you have exchanged your first love! For these you have sold your Lord! Judge for yourselves if the bargain has been a good one--if the 'thirty pieces of the world's silver' by which your eye has been attracted and your heart won will prove an equivalent for a lost first love! One day or other it will cost you dear. Sooner or later you will repent of your 'bargain'--and bewail your folly. Remember that 'no man having drunk old wine immediately desires new--for he says, the old is better.'

You have not indeed renounced Christ--but you have come down from your noble elevation. You have not perhaps ceased to love Him, but you love Him less--and other objects have now a place side by side with Him who once filled up your heart so as to leave no room for a 'rival affection'! You may possess many things (as your gracious Master most kindly allows you)--but you have failed in love. You have a name among the Churches; you have intelligence, wisdom, wealth, honor, position, influence, political and social standing--but you have left your first love! No, you have a zeal, hatred of error, patience, courage, perseverance in well-doing--but you have left your first love!

Insignificant as a descent like this may be in the eyes of men, it is great indeed in the estimation of Him who prizes love above all gifts and offerings, above all gold and frankincense, and myrrh; for is it not written, 'Now abides faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love?' What, then, though

'you could speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love? You have become sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.' 'If a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned' (Song 8:7).

And who are you that think it a right thing to give but 'half a heart' to Him who asks the whole--to Him who loved you and gave Himself for you? Who are you that claim the liberty of giving or withholding affection at your pleasure? Do you not call to mind the thrice-repeated question of your risen Lord 'Do you love me?' And what will you answer Him when He comes again in His glory? Oh, heartless Ephesian--is your Lord's love nothing to you? Is His gracious jealousy, His longing for your love, His grateful remembrance of all your poor services, His entreaty that you should repent and to your first works, His promise, 'To him who overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God'--are all these light things in your eyes?

And if all these are trifles, is a warning like this a trifle, 'Remember whence you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of its place, except you repent?' And is it a trifle to be told, from lips which cannot lie, 'If any man does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema maranatha'?

Oh, heartless Ephesian, retrace your steps at once! You did run well--who has hindered you? Begin once more at the beginning. Go back to the fountainhead of love--I mean your Lord's love to you, the sinner--there refill your empty vessel! Go back to the blessed Sun, whose light is still as free and brilliant as ever; there rekindle your dying torch; there warm your cold heart, and learn to love again, as you did at first. So shall the love of Christ constrain you; you shall love Him who first loved you; you shall feel the quickening power of the living One; you will rise up again to your former warmth, by knowing His love which passes knowledge, and finding that, in spite of all your fickleness and faithlessness, that His love is still the same towards you!

We bring to you the glad tidings of that great love of Christ which was preached at first to Ephesus and by means of which her first love was kindled--the love, not of the Son only, but of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--the free and infinite love of Godhead. It is this which is the true remedy for your lost first love. Go to that love again, and learn it in all its fullness and exceeding riches! Learn that God, who is rich in mercy, for the great love with which He has loved us, even when we were dead in sins, quickens us together with Christ. Learn anew the length and breadth, the depth and height, of this love! Know the love which passes knowledge--that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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