

First Love

(Sermon Notes) By Warren Zehrung – 2/22/2014

Brethren, do you remember the days when each of us earnestly awaited the postman – hoping that he was bringing another one of those **blue booklets** that contained more of God's Truth? We could not wait to devour them and mark our bibles. Everything was so new and so fresh!

Those booklets, and I still have and cherish every one of them, began to open the words and meaning of the bible to us. As we marked our bibles, scripture by scripture, we came to realize that it was God, Himself, speaking to us through His Word.

There is a place in our mind where we give all credence to the Word of God as absolute Truth – unlike all the works of man which are of little significance.

I remember reading about God's covenant with Abraham 4000 years ago – and how miraculously, we were the recipients of those blessings in our day. We were the recipients of **Physical** blessings in our nation as a result of God's promise to Abraham – but more importantly, the **Spiritual** blessings through Jesus Christ.

We learned the truth about the Sabbath, Passover, Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles – picturing a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God on earth – and the Last Great Day.

The very **Plan of God** began to unfold before our eyes.

The Church produced booklets explaining its teaching on these and many other subjects and topics – making the bible come alive for us – as it is – the living Word of God.

At the very first we did not realize that God the Father had reach down and touched our lives – but He had. We referred to that period of spiritual awakening as our **first love**. It was a time when the zeal and the excitement that we experienced was more than we ever expected. Every Sabbath sermon and every booklet opened a vast panorama of exciting, provocative and stimulating new truth to us.

We began to learn about God, the Family of God, and the way of God. We learned repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. We were baptized into the very Body of Christ, and with the laying on of hands – we became children of God – children of our Father – led by His Spirit.

Remember when we came into contact with God's people for the first time? Who could ever forget those strange surroundings as we ventured into the world of Sabbath keeping? God had directed us to come out of the world and be a **separate** people.

2 Corinthians 6:

17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,

And like Peter, we were willing to forsake all to follow Jesus Christ:

Mark 10:

- 28** Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee.
- 29** And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's,
- 30** But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.

Along with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we became a people – an assembly of Church brethren. We loved everybody, and everybody loved us – it was an experience we never expected – it was our **first love** – we could not get enough!

We used the phrase, “First Love,” to refer to this newfound elation and excitement over the biblical Truth of God. But, as we shall see – there is much more to “First Love” than that.

For most of us, it was a time when the local congregations were rather large – and growing rapidly. God was doing something big. The Gospel was going to the world in a significant way that has not been replicated. We felt in awe being among people that already knew the Truth of God. There were members at Sabbath services who had been called and had begun hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ many years before we heard it.

It seemed to us that those long-term members were very nearly perfect. They had been to the Feast of Tabernacles at Big Sandy, Texas, or the BEAUTIFUL SECLUDED MOUNTAIN RESORT of Belknap Springs, Oregon.

Let me share a portion of a co-worker letter from HERBERT W. ARMSTRONG in 1945 in his Good News Letter as WWII was coming to an end.

"BE GLAD and REJOICE! For the Eternal will do great things."

We have reason, indeed, for REJOICING! God has given us a most desirable place for holding the FEAST OF TABERNACLES this year! This year we can keep it more like they did back in Bible times. This is indeed splendid news.

"Please write me, BY RETURN MAIL IF POSSIBLE, for your reservation. Just "take the bull by the horns," as the saying is, make up your mind you are coming, as God commands, then SET YOURSELF TO DO IT! Prices of cabins and hotel rooms INCLUDE a portion charged on each one to pay for use of grounds, dining-room and kitchen, and the large room for holding services. In this way each is charged his share in the general overhead. **15 cabins**---bring bedding: \$2.50 per day for cabin with one double bed: \$3 per day for cabin with two double beds. **30 hotel rooms**, everything furnished; one in room, \$2.50 per day; two in room (one double bed), \$3 per day. Plan to arrive Friday Sept. 21, and leave Sunday Sept 30 ---total 9 days at Belknap. Buses leave Eugene daily 2:PM, and take you direct to hotel at Belknap Springs. We may charter a special bus Friday. For further information, and reservations, WRITE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. We hope to have **every hotel room and cabin filled**. Do not delay.

Signed:

HERBERT W. ARMSTRONG

<http://hwarmstrong.com/history/wcghistory/coworker-letters/450000.html>

By the time we came into the Church, those early brethren had been attending God's Church for so long a time. We felt almost dwarfed by being among "spiritual giants." Of course, we know better now.

We realize that no matter how long ago someone was called, they all struggle spiritually on a daily basis as we do. One of our big struggles, today, is to keep our zeal stirred up for this Way of Life.

Revelation 3:

19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

Revelation 2:

- 1** Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;
- 2** I know thy works, and thy labor, 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:
- 3** And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted.
- 4** Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because **thou hast left thy first love.**

What is the "First Love" that the Ephesians left?

Specific Purpose Statements: How is it possible that an entire Church of God fell away from the truth?

Specific Purpose Statements: What is **First Love** that John is speaking of? We need to explore that.

Revelation 2:

- 5** Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.
- 6** But this thou hast, that thou hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
- 7** He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

Brethren, in many ways, our situation in the Church of God today is similar to the latter days of the first century Ephesian era. Ephesus was the largest port city of Asia Minor on the Mediterranean Sea. The church at Ephesus, which was located in present-day Turkey (Biblical Asia), has disappeared, and there is practically nothing left to remind us of its early existence on a mail route. The Ephesians were gentiles. It was the trading and business center of Asia Minor. The pagan temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, was there in Ephesus – it was a bustling city.

You can read about the City of Ephesus in Acts 19:35:

Acts 19:

- 35** And when the town clerk had appeased the people, he said, Ye men of Ephesus, what man is there that knows not how that the city of the Ephesians is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Jupiter?

The people practiced Paganism, Emperor worship and the magic arts. So, Ephesus was a city of idol worship, hedonism and corruption. The Church brethren knew clearly what God had called them out of.

It seems almost inconceivable that many of those members of the Ephesian Church left their **first love** and fell away, thinking that Christ had "delayed His coming," or going off into substitute Gospels. The excitement of the Ephesians' calling had worn off. The Brethren had accepted false doctrine, sought high positions in the Church and mistreated their fellow servants. Church services had become little more than Social Gatherings. They dressed up and they called on the name of Jesus while they gossiped and planned – like a bunch of stereotypical self-righteous Baptists.

The Brethren had broken up into their favorite cliques and clubs where they could hobnob with the ministry. They snubbed some, and others they attacked their reputations in order to disenfranchise them. The assembly they had been called into, which had had many baptisms, declined to almost nothing. They went so far as to put the true serving brethren **out of the Church** – disfellowshipped – so that they could practice their political intrigues. The majority of the attendees wanted to be where the action was, and so they gravitated toward the larger organizations that eventually became the Roman Catholic Church.

That was a fatal mistake for the Ephesians!

The Ephesian Church had left her **first love** and did not return to it, and this action had fateful consequences. But, let's consider what the scriptures tell us about the **first love** of the Ephesian brethren. Perhaps it is revealed in the Bible that this **first love**, of which John speaks, is **more** than an excitement and celebration.

Looking into the Greek words we find '*protos agape*' – first love.

Though we could correctly translate this as *first* love – as in a *first* kiss – it can be better translated with regard to its importance as **foremost love**. Let's look closely at a Scripture we've seen many, many times before.

Matthew 22:

- 32 I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.
- 33 And when the multitude heard this, they were astonished at [Christ's] doctrine.
- 34 But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together.
- 35 Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,
- 36 Master, which is the **great commandment** in the law?
- 37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.
- 38 This is the first and great commandment.
- 39 And the second is like unto it, **Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.**

There is a strong tendency in human Nature to put the SELF first. We tend to look out for ourselves – take care of our own needs – even feather our own nest. This "LOVE" mentioned here is sometimes described as "Outgoing Concern for another." But Godly Love goes even further than that. Not only is it "Outgoing Concern for another,"... It is "Outgoing Concern for another with **a great personal cost to us.**"

A COST that Jesus often describes as **Laying down our lives for another**. That is the “Love” that Jesus Christ is speaking of. We are not talking about sentimental gibberish here. When Jesus said, “I Love You,” He was saying, I’m dying for you so that you may live.”

John 13:

34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye **love one another**; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

John 15:

12 This is my commandment, That ye **love one another**, as I have loved you.

That is about helping others into the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 22:

39 And the second is like unto it, **Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself**.

Read this scripture this way:

Thou shalt love – have Concern for others with a great personal cost to me – **your neighbor as yourself**.

That is about helping others to attain to eternal life.

Matthew 22:

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

At one time Paul had commended the Ephesians for their **love** of the brethren. Their **Godly love** for the brethren.

Ephesians 1:

15 Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and **love unto all the saints**,

16 Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers;

17 That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him:

Certainly, this practice the Ephesians had of keeping the second great Commandment is of a **higher degree of love** than that of merely a first zeal, and enthusiasm, and excitement that we may have once called “First Love.” But there is yet a **greater love** than this love.

When John wrote:

Revelation 2:

4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because **thou hast left thy first love**.

John was speaking of the fact that the Ephesians **left off loving the saints** as they once had done. But there is more. As we read on in Ephesians we find the **greatest love** – and it is that **love of God** for us.

Ephesians 2:

4 But **God**, who is rich in mercy, for His **great love** wherewith he **loved** us,

5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ,

That Great Love – that is the love that the Ephesians rejected.

Paul told Timothy:

2 Timothy 1:

- 15 This thou know, that all they which are in Asia (including the Ephesians) be turned away from me;

If entire regions of the work of God left the Truth in the first century – are we surprised to find the same thing in the Church of God today? What does it mean: God **loves us**? God's love for us is also in fulfillment of His covenant promise to Abraham.

Deuteronomy 7:

- 7 The LORD did not set his **love** upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people:
- 8 But because the LORD **loved** you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.
- 9 Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keeps covenant and mercy with **them that love him** and keep **His Commandments** to a thousand generations;

Two things: Love God + keep His Commandments. God wants us to be in His image, like what He likes – Hate what He hates. The love of God that He has for us is the **ultimate** love – it is the supreme love – it is the foremost love – it is the true **first love**. This **First Love** of God – that is the **first love** the Ephesians moved away from – they rejected God's Love for them.

How did the Ephesians leave off or forsake this **supreme** gift of God? More importantly to us today, how can the Church of God in these last days avoid rejecting this same precious and vital gift that our forefathers in the Ephesian Church moved away from? Again, that was a fatal mistake for the Ephesians – but we find history repeating in God's Church today!

Paul told the converted Christians at Ephesus: "God has made you [**spiritually**] alive who were [**spiritually**] dead in trespasses and sins." Notice how the Christians at Ephesus were made spiritually alive,

Ephesians 2:

- 1 And you hath he **quickened**, who were **dead** in trespasses and sins;

What a great loving act on God's part... How could that ever be forgotten? "You hath he quickened, [**made alive**] who were dead [that is the penalty of our] trespasses and sins." Brethren, let's walk worthy of our calling and our **vocation** with all the brethren - wherever they are.

Ephesians 4:

- 1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the **vocation** wherewith ye are called,

What is our vocation? Our **vocation** is our calling – our invitation to Christianity.

Ephesians 4:

- 2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

Brethren, notice the aspects of Christianity in that verse.

Ephesians 4:

- 3 Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- 4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
- 5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,
- 6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

In that co-worker letter I was reading to you from Herbert W Armstrong, he spoke of meeting with Brother Kiez and Brother Walker from **Church of God Seventh Day**. Those men from another assembly were a **part** of the ONE Church of God!

Mr. Armstrong recognized all those **led by God's Holy Spirit** as being a part of the one True Church.

Romans 8:

- 14 For as many as are **led by the Spirit of God**, they are the sons of God.

"We expect to have with us again this year the same ministers we had last year at Eugene, when we had such a **spiritual** [Feast]." Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong 1945 Co-Worker Letter.

Today, that **spirit of fellowship** is absent from the corporate organizations. You are not allowed to go to the **Feast** or keep **Passover** with your brethren. That is a personal indictment the Church has brought upon itself. They might just as well hang out a sign that reads, "**We have left our First Love.**" Brethren, let's look at some "First Love" examples:

Mark 12:

- 29 And Jesus answered him, The first [*protos*] of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:
- 30 And thou shalt **love** [*agape*] **the Lord thy God** with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

If you have the first love of loving God with all your heart and mind and soul and being, then you will also **love the brethren**.

Mark 12:

- 31 And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt **love thy neighbor** as thyself. There is **none** other commandment greater than these.

John is an old apostle when he pens these words for us. He has seen the Church rise and fall... begin and fade to very few... When you are studying in First John – notice how often John uses the words – "**Know, Love and Truth.**"

1 John 4:

- 6 We are of God: he that **knows** God hears us; he that is not of God hears not us. Hereby know we the spirit of **truth**, and the spirit of error.
- 7 Beloved, let us **love one another**: for **love** is of God; and every one that **loves** is born of God, and **knows** God.
- 8 He that loves not knows not God; for God is love.
- 9 In this was manifested the **love of God toward us**, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.

The **love of God toward us** is the First Love that was rejected by the Ephesians and is being rejected by the Church of God today.

Again:

1 John 4:

- 9** In this was manifested the **love of God toward us**, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.
- 10** Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that **he loved us**, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
- 11** Beloved, if God **so loved us**, we ought also to **love one another**.

Here is the definitive verse of First Love.

1 John 4:

- 19** We love Him, because **He first loved us**.

We are able to love God because – first of all – and most of all – He loved us first (*protos* - foremost). This is the greatest love.

God Loved us First – First Love.

Learn to love (agapao) God with all our heart, soul and mind.

Romans 5:

- 8** But God commended his **love** toward us, in that, **while we were yet sinners**, Christ died for us.

John 3:

- 15** That whosoever believeth in [the Son of man] should not perish, but have eternal life.

This First Love – this Love of God toward us – begins with the Church brethren – but will extend to the entire world.

John 3:

- 16** For **God so loved the world**, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
- 17** For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

And the companion scripture:

1 John 3:

- 16** Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.
- 17** But whoso hath this world's good, and sees his brother have need, and shuts up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwells the love of God in him?

There is an old saying, "Talk is cheap." Some people say, "Put your money where your mouth is." God tells us that in addition to saying it right – we must be actively involved in right Christian service to others.

1 John 3:

- 18** My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in **deed** and in **truth**.

Revelation 2:

- 7** He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches.
(Revelation 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22)

End: First Love