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**STEPS TO RETURNING TO YOUR FIRST LOVE**

Greetings in the name of our Savior and King- Jesus Christ, The Righteous!

We hope and pray everyone is walking in the fullness of their salvation and experiencing all kinds of favor and earthly blessing!

Life has been good for the Dickerson’s! Levi is growing up so fast and it is so evident how God’s hand is on his life! I guess every parent believes their child is special (like they should), but I truly believe God is going to use Levi to do something great! I perceived 4 years ago when he came into the earth that he was going to take the ministry that God has called me and Shannon to to a new level when our race is finished. No pressure, big boy!☺

Anyways, God has been good to us and I trust you too have experienced His faithfulness in your lives!

Well, in last month’s Living Logos we kicked off the New Year discussing *the* most important message we could ever cover- which is our personal relationship with God. We talked about how there is life found only in knowing God and if we try and live our life without having a personal relationship with the Lord then we will not live much different than the world around us. But, on the other hand, if we cultivate this close fellowship with God, then we can begin to walk in His resurrection life and experience life “more abundantly.”

So, this month, I wanted to continue along these same lines and bring hope to those of us who have experienced a close walk with the Lord like this but maybe have not been as passionate about Him as we once were. So let’s begin by looking over at Revelation chapter 2…

**NEVERMIND THE LESS**

In Revelation chapters 2 & 3 we have the letters to the 7 Churches of Asia Minor, and the first letter that Jesus had the Apostle John write was to the church of Ephesus… In verse 2, Jesus began by saying some very complimentary and exhorting things to this church.

First of all, Jesus commended them for several things that they were producing… The first thing Jesus said was “I know your works.” This means that they evidently had many works of the ministry in operation: they fed the poor, they were hospitable, they witnessed, they met the needs of orphans and widows, etc. They were producing many good works- the works of faith, that is. But these believers not only “worked” for the Lord; Jesus said that they also knew how to “labor” for Him. This means that they worked extremely hard- even to the point of sweat and exhaustion. You see, they believed in the Lord, and the evidence that they had strong faith was in these corresponding actions because you will put effort into something you truly believe in. They were evidently also strong in the arena of “patience”… This means that in the midst of their labor and the persecution they undoubtedly suffered, they “endured”- not giving in to the pressure to quit.

Then Jesus went on to commend them for how they dealt with other outside influences… First of all, He said that they could not “bear those who are evil…” In short, this means that they did not put up with sin in the church! They were not indifferent or complacent. They abhorred what was evil (Romans 12:9) and wanted no part of it. Therefore, they were firm believers in walking in holiness before the Lord. Then Jesus commended them for rejecting the doctrinal impurity that tried to spread like leaven within their church. Jesus said, “And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.” Do you know what this tells us? It tells us they knew the Word! They understood the truth and, therefore, were able to detect the counterfeit when it arose.

But the point I want you to see is that even with all of these incredible virtues that this church possessed (which, sadly, many churches lack today) Jesus still had something extremely important to deal with because, beginning in verse 4, Jesus said, “Nevertheless, I have this against you…” This word “nevertheless” means “notwithstanding” or “in spite of that”, but let’s look at it more literally… It literally could be defined- “Never (mind) the less.” Never mind the less? What is the less? The less important things that He just finished commending them on! You see, our good works, our laboring for the Lord, our endurance through trials, our holiness, our knowledge of the Word and our doctrinal purity are all extremely important as evidence by the fact that Jesus recognized them, but they are not *the* most important. There is something that God wants and desires even above all these good things and that is, our hearts. Let’s look at the rest of verse 4…

**WHAT IS OUR FIRST LOVE?**

So when Jesus said that they had left their “first love” what did He mean? There have been many different views and interpretations to this, but what Jesus was saying becomes quite obvious when you look at the original language… When you delve into the original Greek language this phrase “first love” denotes the love they had “at the beginning.” At the beginning of what? At the beginning of their walk with God (i.e. their salvation)! This paints a picture that many of us have seen before, doesn’t it?

Do you remember what it was like when you first got saved? I sure do… When I was born again, God absolutely turned my world upside down (or more literally, “right side up”). Because of the forgiveness and acceptance that I knew I had received from Him, I fell in love with the Lord. I began to read my Bible constantly- trying to get to know the One who had shown me such mercy. I attended church every time the doors were open- yearning to experience more of His presence. Suffice it to say, I was in love and my heart was full of the desire to know Him more. Everything else I had ever cared about meant nothing to me anymore in comparison to the things of God. My heart was fully and completely devoted towards my God and to give attention to anything else seemed disgusting and trivial to me. I had fallen in love with the lover of my soul and I wanted more of Him and less of the world. I continued this way for 4-plus years, but as is the case with most of us, I allowed that passion for Him to wane. I let that love that I had for Him “in the beginning” start to diminish and found myself flirting with the world again. I let my heart grow lukewarm towards the things of God and found my happiness in these other things.

But doesn’t this happen to almost all of us? We start out head over heels in love with God and then, after some time elapses, we become kind of indifferent towards Him. Sure, we might still go to church, read our Bible occasionally, or pray when we need something, but that same excitement- that drive and passion for Him- is not there like it used to be.

But did you know that this same thing has a tendency to happen in natural relationships too?

When a young man and young woman meet and first fall in love, it becomes rather obvious… They stay up late talking on the phone, texting, etc. They can’t stop thinking about each other. They spend all their free time with one another and usually do not go more than a week without having some kind of special date. They are on each other’s mind constantly and are in each other’s heart abundantly. They are in love to the max!

But then, what ends up happening more times than not? They experience exactly what the church of Ephesus suffered from. They begin to depart from their “first love”- allowing their hearts to depart from the one they had so much love for in the beginning. They started out not being able to stop thinking about each other and spending as much time as possible with each other, but now they spend more time thinking about and doing other things. This young couple might have even got married, maybe had a few kids, but after the newness of their relationship wore off and they became familiar with each other, they have a tendency to leave that love they had at the beginning of their relationship.

It is sad, but this same principle tends to happen in our relationship with God too. But the good news is that it does not have to be this way! There are things that we can do in order to stop these carnal tendencies from coming to pass, in not only these natural relationships but also in our relationship with God.

But before we begin discussing these practical steps, I want us to pay attention to a very little, yet significant word in verse 4 that shows us how we lose our first love in the first place…

**HOW DO WE LEAVE OUR FIRST LOVE?**

Again, Jesus said, “Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have *left* your first love.” This word “left” is important because it means something altogether different than what we might think of when we think of “leaving” something…

You see, when we think of someone having left some place, we get the picture of someone intentionally, deliberately, and purposefully deciding to leave. But the Greek word for “left” here describes a slow and unintentional departure. So, when Jesus said that they had left their first love, He was saying that they had slowly, methodically, systematically, and probably unknowingly, left that love they had for Him in the beginning.

You see, in almost every case where someone allows their heart to depart from the Lord it starts out unintentional. No one just wakes up one day and intentionally decides to depart from a vibrant relationship with God. It is a process that begins well before we ever see the fruit manifest. It begins in our heart and then sometime after that, is culminated in our actions- similarly to how a seed must go through a process before it ever produces any of its fruit.

And do you know how this process of leaving our first love starts? It begins when we just become a little too busy to spend time with God. For example, it usually starts out with things like being a little too wrapped up in our church work that we do not have time to read our Bible as much or maybe deciding to sleep in when we know that we should get up a little early to spend time in prayer. In short, it is a process that begins through making poor decisions. So we need to understand that the process of leaving this love we possessed at the beginning is not an overnight process. Oftentimes, we are not even aware that the process is even taking place. Therefore, we need to be all the more sober and vigilant to keep our hearts with all diligence lest we allow this slow and unintentional departure to happen in our lives!

So here is the question for this hour- What are we to do about this if we feel our heart has already departed from our first love?

Well, thank God that Jesus is not like so many preachers/teachers today- declaring what we need to do and not telling us how to do it. Jesus immediately begins in verse 5 to tell us the 3 steps that we need to take in order to return to our first love. He uses the word “therefore” near the beginning of verse 5 to basically say, “Alright my children, you have allowed your hearts to begin this slow and unintentional departure from Me, but this does not mean that you can’t reverse the process! There are steps you can take to return to Me. THEREFORE…”

So let’s look specifically at these 3 steps and see how we too can return to that love for the Lord that we had in the beginning…

**STEP #1- REMEMBER** **FROM WHERE YOU HAVE FALLEN**

Jesus begins in verse 5 by saying- “Remember therefore from where you have fallen…” This is step #1- remembering the place that we once walked in with the Lord!

You know, our memory is so much more important than we even understand. It can either serve us or enslave us. It all depends on the things we are remembering.

Throughout the institution of the law, God continually told the children of Israel to remember how He brought them out of Egypt and delivered them from bondage. He set up holidays such as the Sabbath, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Passover, etc. so they would constantly remember what God had done for them. God also had Israel set up monuments and landmarks so that they would remember His marvelous works.

Now we understand that Israel’s salvation from their slavery to Egypt was a type and shadow of our salvation from slavery to Satan and sin. Therefore, those continuous reminders written in the law are for our admonition as well! Not only that, but we also have things in the New Testament that are meant to remind us- such as, the Lord’s Supper… God instituted what we call “Communion” so that we would be brought into remembrance of what Jesus did for us (1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

But, why did God want the children of Israel to constantly be reminded of what God did for them in Egypt? It was because by being continuously reminded of that glorious redemption, they would have not allowed their hearts to become hardened. You see, **the children of Israel constantly failed to trust God to provide for them in the wilderness because they forgot what He had provided for them in Egypt**. And this still happens with God’s children today… We allow our hearts to become hardened too when we do not consider what God has already done for us.

You see, the reason that cultivating a mindset to remember the things God has done for us is so important is because we have a tendency to forget them. That’s why David said in Psalm 103, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me Bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits.”He said “and forget none of His benefits” because our natural tendency is to forget them. But what I love about this passage of scripture is that it also shows us practically how we can remember these benefits of our salvation, and it’s through the power of praise & worship… Twice in this passage did David command his soul to “bless the Lord.” You see, when we “bless the Lord” (which is to praise Him for the good things He has done), we keep ourselves from forgetting His benefits. Why? Because we are purposefully reminding ourselves of those benefits as we thank, praise, and worship Him for them! Praise God!

But remembering what God has done has other benefits as well… 2 Peter 1:3 & 3:1 give us the principle that as we remind ourselves of what God has said and done, our remembering of these things stirs us up! So not only does remembering these things keep us from becoming hardened to their memory, it also stirs us up to their reality!

You see, the Greek word translated “stir up” in these verses means “to arouse, awaken, revive, or stimulate.” This is what remembering something does…It stimulates and arouses our mind in regards to the thing being remembered. And this was God’s intent when He commanded Israel to remember His works. When we meditate on something it becomes more and more prominent in our mind. So when we meditate on the works of God they become more magnified on the inside of us and we become fired up about them! Hallelujah!

So how does this pertain to us returning to our first love?

Well, as we remember from where we have fallen- which is, the experiences we used to have in our relationship with God when we were head over heels in love with Him- we become “stirred up” to experience them again! For example, when we intentionally recall the place we once walked where no work for Him was drudgery, where we loved to study the Word, and where we couldn’t wait to get in our prayer closet, when we remember the peace and joy that we experienced as a result of that love we possessed, when we recall the myriad of benefits that we experienced in those early days when we had a heart that was completely inclined towards Him, we stimulate in our heart and mind a desire to return to that place! Yes, remembering those glorious times will stir us up and cultivate in us a desire to get back to that place again! Praise the Lord! You know, we will not hunt for something that we do not remember losing. This is why remembering what we once had is such a vital first step to returning to that place again.

**STEP #2- REPENT**

The next step Jesus gave us in returning to our first love was in one simple admonition- “repent”; and this is just how simple repentance really is. Let me explain…

There are many different wrong views in the church today when it comes to repentance… Many just think that repentance is simply feeling sorry for what you have done- maybe shedding a tear or two. Others think that repentance is a process that involves performing some kind of penance. Let me tell you, true biblical repentance is none of these!

Repentance simply means to change- to change your thinking and to change your direction. It is that simple! It is not a process of trying to atone for your mistakes or going through steps to getting back into the good graces of God. It is not an emotion that is produced through guilt or condemnation. **Repentance is just simply determining to change!**

There is, perhaps, no greater description of repentance than in Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)… After the prodigal son left his father’s house and spent all that he had, he came to the place where he was wallowing with the pigs (i.e. suffering from the wages of sin and eating the fruit of his poor decisions). In verses 17-18, Jesus said “when he came to himself, he said, ‘…I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’…” And after he said this, he backed up these decisive words with the works of repentance (i.e. corresponding actions). You see, this reiterates to us that repentance is a deliberate decision to return to the Lord. It is not an emotion, nor is it just the remorse that we feel. It is an act of our will to not continue wallowing around in the sin that we have been stained by. It is us determining to change the direction that we have been going and consciously deciding to return to the Lord.

But I want you to also notice what the prodigal son did before he made the decision to return to his father’s house… He remembered what it was like in His father’s house (vs.17)! This goes back to the first step that Jesus gave us in Revelation chapter 2 of remembering where we have fallen from. Do you see how these steps build upon each other?

So, in regards to us returning to our first love, our second step is determining to change the direction we have been going. The first thing we do is we recall the way things were and then we make a decision to get back up and return to that place again. Once we truly resolve to make that decision to return to the Lord, we are well on our way to returning to our first love.

**STEP #3- DOING THE FIRST WORKS**

But someone might say, “But Trey, I have done these things! I remember the way things used to be and I am stirred up to get back there! And to the best of my knowledge, I have repented and made the decision that I will do whatever is necessary to return wholeheartedly to Him! But here is my problem: I don’t know how! Practically, what am I supposed to do!?!”

I am glad you brought this up☺… The answer to this question is found in the next and final step where Jesus said, “…and do the first works.”

Let’s, first of all, look at the words “first works”… What did Jesus mean by their “first works?” Well, if you compare this with the terminology Jesus used in verse 4 of our “first love,” the answer becomes quite obvious… Our first works are the things we did before we left our first love. In other words, these were the corresponding actions that came as a result of being head over heels in love with the Lord Jesus.

So what are some examples of these first works from our own lives? Well, during those times where our hearts have been full of that love for God, some of the more obvious corresponding actions were a hunger for the Word of God and a desire to spend time in prayer. These things were not something we had to be coerced into doing. They just came as a result of having a heart that was passionate about the Lord. The other corresponding actions were not necessarily what we did, but what we didn’t do… For example, our desire for the things of the world was not as strong. We didn’t desire our hobbies quite as much. We didn’t live to watch television as much. Our greatest desire was for the things of God because when we possessed that love we had at the beginning, our hearts were less inclined towards other things.

So why would Jesus tell us to do the first works in order to return to our first love? In other words, if these first works were a by-product of that love that we had in the beginning in the first place, how will doing them now help us in returning to our first love?

The answer to these questions lies in understanding one of the greatest principles of the kingdom of God- *faith*. You see, **feelings follow faith**! So when we do things by faith, with no feelings to speak of, the feelings will follow. Therefore, when we do the things we did during the times when we loved God with our whole heart we are positioning our heart to change back to the condition it was once in. This will result in us regaining those feelings we once had. This is the power of doing things by faith! Faith is the currency by which everything in God’s kingdom operates by! So this is why doing the “first works” is a major step in returning to our “first love”… It is because doing them by faith will create the condition we desire to return to.

But walking by faith and doing these first works is not easy to do when there is no emotional help. This is why we must get creative- which leads me to another word in this third and final step…

Again, Jesus said, “…and *do* the first works.” This word “do” comes from the Greek word “poeio” which is where we get the words “poem” or “poet” from. Obviously, a poet or poem describes someone or something that possesses a creative flare, so when Jesus said to “do” the first works, He was indicating that we need to get creative in doing them. Why? Because it is not going to come naturally when there are no emotions or feelings involved. You have to plan to do them. You have to do them on purpose. For example, recently I heard of a man of God who had an alarm set up on his phone to go off once every hour to remind him to acknowledge the Lord. Now that is creative and by doing things like that you can stir up those old feelings!

I hope that this has been an encouragement to you this month… Let me tell you, this happens to all of us. It doesn’t have to, but it tends to happen in the lives of most believers. But I can assure you that by doing these 3 steps that Jesus gave us, we too can return to our first love and experience the joy of our salvation again! God bless you as you pursue Him with your whole heart!

Maranatha!

Victoriously,

And the great thing about repentance is that God does not make us do it all ourselves! In the parable of the Prodigal son, after he repented and started on his way back to his father’s presence, his father “ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.” God will not make us do all the work of repentance. He will run to meet us, as we have taken the first few steps, and he will put the sandals on our feet, the best robe on our back, and a ring on our finger. God will be there with us to help us return home!!! That is just the loving and compassionate God that He is. He gives us grace to repent!!! Selah

There were a couple of different Greek words that were translated “repent” in the original King James Version. One was “metanoeo” (34 times) and the other was “metamelomai” (5 times). The word “metanoeo”- which is the common word used in reference to biblical repentance- basically means to “change one’s mind.” It involves the intellect and the will. It is more than an emotional sorrow, which too often does not produce any change in one’s life. It is rather a change of mind, or attitude, toward God, sin, and ourselves. Deep repentance involves a real turnabout in our lives. One expositor defines it as a “mental transfiguration.” I think a good rendering of this word is to “determine.” To “repent” is to determine to change!

So when God says to “repent”, He is not saying to do something to try and make up for your sins or to weep for an hour at some church altar; He is just saying to turn from the direction you have been going and determine to change.

You see, too often sorrow is confused with repentance, but although the two may be closely related in experience, they are far apart in their essential meaning.

The distinction between sorrow and repentance is clearly indicated in 2 Corinthians 7:10- *“For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted: but the sorrow of the world produces death.”* This Scripture teaches us that there are two types of sorrow. There is “godly sorrow” and there is “worldly sorrow.” Paul says that “godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation” but “worldly sorrow produces death.” That means that there is a right way and there is a wrong way to be sorrowful for your sins.

In the Gospels we have two great examples of the difference between these two kinds of sorrow. The Bible says that Judas “repented” after he betrayed Jesus. But we know that was not godly sorrow because it did not lead to repentance. It was worldly sorrow because it led to death- condemnation and subsequent suicide. But godly sorrow was greatly illustrated by the account of Simon Peter denying the Lord three times. The Bible tells us that after he denied the Lord he “went out and wept bitterly.” But this sorrow did not produce him ultimately denying Jesus. He returned and ended up standing boldly on the porch of the upper room and preached the gospel to everyone who could hear on the day of Pentecost!