

GETTING BACK TO WHAT MATTERS

You may have heard the story about the pot roast. Let me remind you this morning:

A young woman was hosting a dinner party for her friends and served a delicious pot roast. One of her friends enjoyed it so much that she asked for the recipe, and the young woman wrote it down for her. Upon looking over the recipe, her friend inquired, "Why do you cut both ends off the roast before it is prepared and put in the pan?" The young woman replied, "I don't know. I cut the ends off because I learned this recipe from my mom and that was the way she had always done it." Her friend's question got the young woman thinking and so the next day she called her mom to ask her: "Mom, when we make the pot roast, why do we cut off and discard the ends before we set it in the pan and season it?" Her mom quickly replied, "That is how your grandma always did it and I learned the recipe from her." Now the young woman was really curious, so she called her elderly grandma and asked her the same question: "Grandma, I often make the pot roast recipe that I learned from mom and she learned from you. Why do you cut the ends off the roast before you prepare it?" The grandmother thought for a while, since it had been years since she made the roast herself, and then replied, "I cut them off because the roast was always bigger than the pan I had back then. I had to cut the ends off to make it fit."

This story is true for so many of the things we do in life. We have been doing them for so long that we rarely stop and question the rationality behind them anymore.

For the month of January, are focusing on what Jesus said to the church in Ephesus in Revelation "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have **left your first love**" 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and **do the first works**.

How does this fit in with the story of the pot roast? I believe it carries a very important truth that will help us better understand the words Christ spoke the church through the Apostle John's revelation on the isle of Patmos. In this story, **they had forgotten why they did what they did in the first place** – the meat was cut smaller to fit in the pot, they were however still doing the first works.

In contrast, **the church in Ephesus had forgotten what they did when they first became a church. They were not doing what was done in the first place.** They were doing something, but they had forgotten the first works.

This message applies to you and me today just as it applied to the church in Ephesus. Let us learn from it today so that we too can remember and return to our first works.

INTRODUCTION

Revelation 2:4-5 NKJV) Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

THE WORKS OF THE EARLY CHURCH – THE FIRST WORKS

What were the works that the early church did - these are the "first works" Jesus was referring to when He said "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works...."

I found this article by Rick Renner in a study first works on the Rick Renner Ministries website:

"The phrase "first works" comes from the Greek words *prota erga*. The word *prota* means first or early, and the word *erga* means works, deeds, or activity, conveying the idea of work that is produced by consistent and tireless effort.

Although the King James Version translates this Greek phrase as "first works," it could actually be interpreted, "the actions that were indicative of you at the first" or "the things you did in the very beginning."

Jesus commanded them to return to their "first works." He was referring to the words, deeds, and activities that characterized the Ephesian congregation at the beginning of their spiritual journey when they first fell in love with Jesus Christ.

What were these "first works" that once distinguished the church of Ephesus? Scripture reveals several characteristics of this prominent church in its early beginnings:

- They possessed a great spiritual hunger (see Acts 18:20).
- They enjoyed rich fellowship among the brethren (see Acts 18:27).
- They had an eagerness to repent and to receive what God had for them (see Acts 19:1-6).
- They cherished the Word of God (see Acts 19:8).
- They sacrificed their religious reputation for Jesus (see Acts 19:9).
- They were committed to applying God's Word to their lives (see Acts 19:10).
- They were receptive to the power of God and to the gifts of the Spirit (see Acts 19:11,12).
- They loved Jesus and the wonder-working power associated with His name (see Acts 19:17).
- They were quick to confess their sin and turn from their evil works (see Acts 19:18).
- They severed all connections with a pagan past at great personal cost (see Acts 19:19).
- They were publicly persecuted for the sake of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15:32).
- They were faith-filled (see Ephesians 1:15).

- They were known for their love of the brethren (see Ephesians 1:15).

All of the qualities listed above characterized this passionate, vibrant congregation in its early years. The fact that Christ called for them to return to doing these "first works" doesn't necessarily mean they had become completely void of these attributes. However, it is evident that the intensity of their zeal had radically diminished. Thus, Christ urged them to remember, to repent, and to do the first works for these reasons:

- Remembering how the fire of God once burned in their hearts was essential. Only by remembering what they used to be could the Ephesian believers realize how far they had drifted.
- Repentance was God's requirement. An acknowledgment and confession of sin was the place to begin. If they were willing to humble themselves and repent, it would lead to their restoration and spare them from impending judgment.
- Repentance demands proof. A person who confesses his sin with no intention of changing is doing nothing more than admitting his guilt. He is not exhibiting genuine repentance. True repentance is always accompanied by corresponding actions. Regarding the Ephesian believers, Jesus made it clear that the proof of their repentance would be a return to a passionate pursuit of intimately knowing Him."

What about us church? If I look back five and a half years to the excitement and zeal we had in the first year after I took over from Pastor Pat, it becomes clear that we are not as excited and dedicated as we used to be.

- We were attending morning and evening services regularly.
- We were having street ministry and many people would participate.
- We had special services on a regular basis and people willingly attended.
- We had many volunteers involved when ever we asked for help with the maintenance of our church building.
- We were striving to be the church God has called us to be, a church of irresistible influence.
- Now we struggle to get more than 60 people in attendance of services.
- When I ask if anyone is interested in doing courses, or online Bible Studies I get very few responses.
- Our life groups are closed – our fellowship is limited.
- Even our online viewership by those who are not attending services has dwindled.
- Outreach into our community, including food, clothing and evangelism is almost non-existent.

A lot of these things were impacted by covid safety measures but why is it so difficult for us to get back to services and ministry as normal? Could it be that we as a church are prime candidates for Christ's words, "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent,

and do the first works....". I challenge us today, let us repent and quickly respond by returning to the "first works".

THE INDIVIDUAL BELIEVER AND FIRST WORKS

We have spoken about the church, but how about us as individual believers. Is this message relevant to us too? When a person receives Christ as their Saviour, they experience the delight of "first love" for the Lord. God's Spirit witnesses with their spirit that they are a child of God, and this newfound relationship brings great joy and freedom in Christ.

Unfortunately, it is possible for Christians to fall away from this first love, and there are many ways in which this can take place. When the believer neglects depending on a daily relationship with God, their love for God will grow cold

Day two of our 10-day Bible study lists **neglect of these things as reasons** for growing cold in our relationship with the Lord:

- Neglect of worship.
- Neglect of prayer.
- Neglect of God's word.
- Neglect of giving.
- Neglect of fasting.
- Neglect of serving.

When one is born-again, you don't really have much spiritual wisdom. Your knowledge of God's word is limited. I thought about what we do know when we are newly born-again:

- We didn't know much, but we were certainly impacted by the grace encounter we'd had, and people could see the change in us.
- We didn't need to know much but we certainly wanted to tell others about our encounter with Christ.
- We were in love with Jesus, this new relationship with Him made us want to spend time speaking to Him and getting to know His word.
- And there was something else... we had not yet grown religious or judgmental.
- We **were simple and straight forward in our relationship with our King**. We reveled in the fact that we had been forgiven and we understood that being sinners, we had received grace. If God's grace could reach us, it could reach others too!

Sadly, as the years passed and our knowledge of the Bible increased, instead of a straight-forward and simple faith like we had at first, things like self-righteousness, judgmentalness, a legalistic attitude and mechanical religion may have crept in. **Jesus said, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works"**

This brings us back to the story we began with about the pot roast. For generations they cut off the end of the pot roast because they had forgotten why it was done in the first place. In the same way we become judgmental, self-righteous and legalistic about things because **we have forgotten why we became Christians in the first place.**

- We became Christians not because of our own goodness but because of God's goodness.
- We gave our hearts to Jesus because we were incredibly aware of our own sinfulness and need for salvation.
- We didn't judge others because the judgement we deserved had been set aside.

When Christ challenges us to return to the first love and do the things we did at first, He is reminding us to walk in the grace and joy of our salvation instead of being religious and self-righteousness and legalistic in our faith.

If we are to evaluate ourselves against the points I have made today, can we really say we are still strong when it comes to our first love? Does our life reflect the first love for Christ? John 14:15 (AMP) If you [really] love Me, you will keep (obey) My commands.

CONCLUSION

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Romans 14:17 (NKJV) for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

This is what really matters! The kingdom of God is not about outward acts or superficial practices that have no eternal value! The kingdom of God is all about righteousness – which we receive freely from God through Christ's sacrifice. It's about being at peace with men and with God and not about having a judgmental attitude that leads to strife, and it's about the joy of salvation. In Psalm 51 David prayed, "Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation".

Earlier in Romans, the apostle Paul identified what really matters this way:

Romans 2:28-29 (NKJV) For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit and a circumcised heart are what really matters, not the things which are seen outwardly, but the outworking of a genuine transition of our heart attitude. These will be evidenced by the characteristics of God's kingdom being manifest through our lives through a renewed first love for Christ and a new commitment to the works we did at first. **It's time to return to our first love!**