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VERITAS

Equipping Christians to live by truth—veritas—from God.

How to Make Your 'First Love' an 'Always Love'

Dr. Joseph M. Stowell III



Joseph M. Stowell, a 1970 graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, is president of Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and a frequent speaker at churches and conferences throughout the United States and Canada. He writes columns in *Moody* magazine and *Today in the Word*. Dr. Stowell is heard daily on the broadcast *Proclaim!* and weekly on the international radio broadcast *Moody Presents*. He's authored several books, including *The Upside of Down*, *Perilous Pursuits*, *Shepherding the Church into the 21st Century*, *Eternity*, and *Loving Christ*. He and his wife, Martie, make their home in Chicago and are the parents of three married children.

This article is adapted from Dr. Stowell's 2000 Nathan D. Maier Memorial Series in Bible Exposition, given in October in Chafer Chapel.

All of us who are in our 50s probably remember well the classic Paul Simon tune that has lyrics that go something like this: "We work our jobs, collect our pay, believe we're gliding down the highway, when in fact we're slip sliding away. Slip sliding away. . . slip sliding away. . . you know, the nearer your destination, the more you're slip sliding away."

I wonder if Jesus ever feels that way about you. I'm sure He probably feels that way about me at times, because there is a very subtle thing that happens in this pilgrimage.

It is so subtle, you might not even notice it. We start out at the very beginning of our Christian lives when we go to the Cross, embrace those old rugged timbers, and feel the sin and weight of our guilt eternally removed. It starts out as a loving relationship with a Person, and it is driven by relationship.

And yet slowly but surely it ends up being more like a ritual than a relationship. What starts out as a matter of the heart slowly but surely becomes a matter of habit. What was once a devotion becomes a duty.

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There are a lot of problems with that. One problem is that it takes our Christian experience, which was meant to be a blessing, and changes it into a burden. Ever feel like that? What was once a passion becomes a project. And unfortunately, when it gets like that, it can even be rather boring at times. The danger is that there is not a whole lot of motivation to stay faithful when the times get tough.

THE CHURCH THAT JILTED JESUS

Do you ever wonder what Jesus thinks about pilgrims who are about duty and habit and ritual and projects and burdens? Pilgrims who are kind of bored with it all? Want to know what Jesus thinks? Good. Because we are going to look.

Open your Bibles to Revelation 2:1-3, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.'"

You read a list like this, and you want to vote them "church of the year." I mean, this is terrific stuff. This is a really good crowd of performers for Christ. But what shakes me is what happens next in

the text. To these people, who are worthy of such praise for their tenacity and faithfulness in the deeds that they do, Jesus says, "But I have this against you."

That, my friends, is a very scary thought.

Yes, I know we take great comfort in the words of Romans, where it says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" But did you ever turn that around? Here Christ says, *In the midst of all your good deeds I have a huge, big-time problem with you.* So it has my attention. I hope it has yours, because we tend to be good performers, don't we? We tend to try to persevere and to check out false teaching and to do good deeds, but in the midst of that, could He have something against us? So my

heart wants to keep reading, and He explains why. He says, "You have left your first love."

Now, what does that mean?

The Greek word here for "first" means "first in priority." This is the supremacy word. Jesus is saying: *You don't serve because you are driven by your love for Me. Your love for Me is not a priority. I am not supreme in what you do.* I have to tell you that this gives me reason for pause in my busyness for Jesus.

I am not surprised that He would say this. All through Scripture—Old Testament and New Testament alike—God is pursuing a loving relationship with us. At the very beginning, when He revealed what the relationship would be built on, in Deuteronomy 6, He said, "You

shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

The great covenant concept of the Old Testament, the word *hesed*, is that God loyally loves us in order to entice us to respond to Him in love. In Matthew 22, Jesus says the first and greatest commandment is "You shall love the Lord your God."

WHY JESUS PASSIONATELY PURSUES YOU

Think of the metaphor of the church. It is a romantic metaphor. I love this! We are the bride and He is the bridegroom! This is a loving thing.

Go to Christ's last encounter with Peter. Here Jesus is in His last discussion with Peter, and what is He interested in? He says, *Peter, I need to know one thing about you. I need to know, do you love Me?* Not once or twice, but three times: *Peter, I need to know, do you love Me?*

The whole sense in Revelation is that, as He watches them do what they do, there is a deep offense in His heart because He is no longer a part of *why* they do what they do. They don't act out of that priority—a supreme love for Jesus Christ. I think you ought to let that filter down a little bit.

Why do you do what you do? It is a very important question to ask. Why do you study? *Oh, I want to get good grades. My wife forces me to sit down and do my homework. My church is paying a scholarship*

based on my grade point average. Why do you study?

Jesus wants to ask you that question today:

Why do you do what you do for Me?

Why do we teach? *Because that is how we are built; that is how we are wired. This is our gift; it is our calling. We enjoy interaction with students; we like mentoring, and so on.* Why do we teach? Why do you resist temptation? *Consequences, that is clear—I do not want to have anything to do with those. I do not want to embarrass the church.* Why do you resist temptation?

Why do you give money to the kingdom? *Because God says if I give Him money, He'll give me more back.* That is so lame and so totally unbiblical.

Why do you sing in the choir, if you do? *Well, I love singing alto; besides, I get out of the house on Thursday nights and can stick my spouse with the kids.*

Wrong answers. Jesus wants to ask you that question today: *Why do you do what you do for Me?*

What is really convicting to me is that it is possible for me to be busy, busy, busy for Him—doing all the right things—and He never feels loved by me. That is the way it was in Ephesus.

Is Jesus the supreme center of all that you do, and do you do what you do because you love Him? That is the driving question of it all.

So He says to the church at Ephesus, *It is not about Me anymore, it is all about you. I want you to do*

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What was once a passion becomes a project.

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what you do because you love Me. He gives a warning, and I think this warning is important to note. He says in verse 5, "I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent."

We ask again, what does that mean? Well, "lampstand" is a symbol for light, isn't it? Lampstand reflects on the metaphor of darkness and light that John has so often used. And that light brings power over the darkness. I think this is a metaphor saying, *If you don't change, you will have a powerless experience in this world. If you want to do church without Me, good, you can have it, but the power is gone. No effectiveness; the darkness prevails.*

In fact, that might just be a little measure about why the church in the United States is so dreadfully anemic, so seemingly powerless in the darkness of this world. It might be because we are not *driven* by a refreshing, contagious, and compelling love for Jesus Christ because of all He has done for us.

HOW TO RESTORE YOUR PASSION

So what are we to do? The thing I love about Jesus, among many things, is that He is so wonderfully remedial. Does He say, *You're out of here! Annihilation! Gone! We'll start over again!* No. Look, if you will, at verse 5. He has a three-step

remedial plan for our hearts.



Number one, He says, "Remember from where you have fallen."

Memories have power. Jesus says that you need to think back to those early days when you did all that you did because you loved Him. Memories have the power to inspire us.

My dad was a pastor in northern New Jersey, at First Baptist Church in Hackensack. I grew up there. I had been gone for many years and revisited the church. I remember walking into the sanctuary all by myself and stopping in the stillness of that room and looking around, looking at the pulpit where I used to hear my

dad preach all the time, thinking about the fact that every Sunday afternoon he would say, "What did I preach about today?" I looked at that pew where my mom and two sisters and I always used to sit, thinking about the finger marks on my knee from my mother "telling" me to sit still.

Then, I thought about the prayer meetings where I heard people stand up and pray for the pastor's children by name, where I heard godly people pray. As a little kid, these were dents made on my heart. I thought about my Sunday School teachers.

I am not given to crying, but all of a sudden my eyes welled up. You

know what I wanted? I wanted to find those people; I wanted to find them and say, "Thank you. Thank you for praying for this naughty little kid—this PK!" To my Sunday School teachers, I wanted to say, "I am so sorry that I disrupted your class every Sunday!"

Memories have a way of inspiring us. The wonderful thing is that if you can remember what it was like when Jesus first drove your life, you can go back and resurrect that. He says, *I want you to remember.*



Number two, He says, "I want you to repent."

So this is heavy stuff now. This is a repentance issue. As you know, repentance is not some big, slow, three-year U-turn in your life. You hit a wall and you fall broken at the base of the wall and you pick yourself up and change the way you think, change the way you live—and move in a totally different direction.

Jesus is asking us to repent. How would you like to change the way you think about what you do for Him? How would it be if, before you do anything, you kind of rock back on your heels, let your eyes glaze over a little bit, and say:

Lord, I just want You to know that I am going to do this now for one compelling reason, and that is to express my love for You for all that You have done for me. Lord, I am

going to resist this temptation right now to tell You that I love You more than I love these urges and the desires

The church in the United States is dreadfully anemic, so seemingly powerless in the darkness of this world.

of my heart. I am going to study for two hours right now, Lord, and it is not just about my grades.

This is about You and because I love You. This is how I am going to express my love to You. Lord, I've believed for too long that because I am in Christian service my money already has been tithed, so I don't need to give anything back to You. I am going to give You the firstfruits even if I don't have

enough at the end of the month. I am going to give You the firstfruits because I love You. Lord, I'll just spend my life looking for ways to tell You that I love You. Here it is. I can do this now.

Change the way you think!
Change the way you live!



Then, number three, He says, "Do the deeds you did at first."

Reignite those early deeds! If you don't do what you do for the supremacy of Jesus in your life, there will be a lot of things that you *can't* do. God tells us to forgive the most cruel injustices against us. If you just do it because it is what you are supposed to do, you are not going to get that done.

This is so liberating! You say, *I am not going to forgive my father. I am not going to forgive that person. They don't deserve to get off the hook. You are right; they don't deserve to get off the hook. You are not doing it*

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for them; you are doing it because Jesus is worthy, and He asked you to do this, and you love Him. So you forgive your enemies. That's what this is all about.

So He says, *Go back and reignite what you did at first.*

I want you to know that I have found Jesus to be worthy of anything He asks me to do. And I am glad to be liberated—whether or not anybody else is worthy of what I do.

I do a lot of things around the house. Through 34 years of marriage, I have done tons of things. I have done tons of weird things—things I don't like to do. I have changed diapers. We now have four grandkids; the oldest one is four. I had a four-year track record of not changing any of their diapers until two weeks ago, when I broke my record. When we had our kids, I changed diapers. I did panic cleaning with Martie when people called and said they would be over in five minutes. We had to dust and throw things in closets. I have spent Saturday mornings behind a vacuum cleaner. Before we had a dishwasher, I used to wash and dry dishes.

So let's say Martie comes to me one day and says, "Joe, why do you do this?" And I say to her, "Because I am committed to the institution of marriage, that's why. Because marriages are falling apart in America and it is a sacred design. I am committed to the institution of marriage." She would swoon, right?

No, she wouldn't!

Or what if I would say, "Because I want to be a good husband, that is why. I really want to be a good husband." Well, that is all about me. I don't think she would swoon.

But I think if she came to me and said, "Joe, why do you do this?" and I looked right into those beautiful, one-of-a-kind set of brown eyes, and said, "Martie, I want you to know why I do this.

There is only one reason. It's because I love you, and I just look for ways to let you know how much I love you," I think she might swoon . . . and I know that Jesus is looking for that attitude in my heart, because it is a horrible thing when I am busy about all the good things and He still doesn't feel loved by me. He'll see that we love

Him when He is supreme in our lives, when our lives reflect the words that we so often sing:

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine; For Thee all the follies of sin I resign. My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou, If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now!¹

More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee! Hear Thou the prayer I make on bended knee. This is my earnest plea: more love, O Christ, to Thee; More love to Thee, more love to Thee!²

¹ From *My Jesus, I Love Thee* by William R. Featherston

² From *More Love to Thee, O Christ* by Elizabeth P. Prentiss

Is Jesus the supreme center of all that you do . . . because you love Him? That is the driving question.

A Scholar's Greatest Challenge

This issue of *Veritas* offers you one of the "best of the best" messages delivered here on campus in our own historic Chafer Chapel. Dr. Joseph M. Stowell, president of Moody Bible Institute, delivered this edition's message.

Joe encouraged our students and faculty at the 2000 Nathan D. Maier Memorial Series in Bible Exposition last fall as he preached an impassioned message on something we all need to hear about: *falling in love with Jesus over and over again, every day.*

I was so challenged by this message personally.

You see, in the world of top-flight biblical scholarship, there may be the temptation to forget the point of that knowledge, which is to change hearts.

Our desire at Dallas Seminary is for God to protect us—to ensure that intellectual prowess doesn't turn into intellectual pride. We don't want to produce mere thinkers, but, rather, leaders who know how to *apply* what they know in a way that changes their lives and the lives of others.

As always, I urge you to pray for DTS, and my specific request in light of my good friend Joe Stowell's riveting message is for you to pray that we all—faculty, staff, and students—continue to have our hearts filled with Christ as well as our minds filled with Scripture.

Your prayers are so crucial. God works through the prayers and financial support of committed Christians like you as He uses DTS to provide pastors, ministers, missionaries, and other leaders for His Church.

God bless you as you read Joe Stowell's message about the heart, and apply it to yours.



Dr. Mark L. Bailey
President

Mark Bailey