

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL BURNOUT

When Love Grows Cold

Revelation 2:1-7

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The old *Saturday Evening Post* once ran a piece on marriage, the husband's response to his true love's common cold. Here it is (slightly adapted). Year one: "Sugar dumpling, I'm worried about you. I'll bring you some food and you just rest." Year two: "Listen, darling, I don't like the sound of that cough. I've called the Dr." Year three: "Maybe you'd better go lie down. Is there any canned soup that I can fix really fast?" Year four: "Now listen. After you feed the kids and wash the dishes, you should lie down." Year five: "Why don't you gargle or something, instead of lying around barking like a seal? You're going to give me pneumonia!" Yes, familiarity breeds contempt! We sometimes lose the passion that we had at first--in any relationship, including our walk with God.

How many times have we all sung that great hymn, "Come Thou Fount," and repeated those words, "prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love..." The man who wrote that hymn, Robert Robinson, was born 41 years before the American Revolution! Nothing changes!

Could we just have a chat this morning about spiritual burnout? It's not my intention to pile on the guilt. Nor do I have easy answers. You'll have to take the raw material of this sermon series and work out your own salvation (Phil. 2:13). But let's at least talk about it. What causes burnout? It usually begins with a carelessness in our relationship. We are inattentive and preoccupied. And then, because we're embarrassed about feeling so far from God, we fake it. We don't mean to, but we do. We think we're the only one whose love has grown cold, so we fake it. I love this cartoon. Mom and the children are standing over Dad, who is at the breakfast table. "Hurry up, Ted! You're the only one not ready for church." Mom and the kids have their masks on!

The Book of Revelation gives us a picture of the church after the new had worn off, when troubles piled up. Seven churches are put under Christ's microscope. Here's what the church at Ephesus had going for it, vv. 2-3: hard work, doctrinal purity and endurance. Those are great, right? But guess what. You can have those things and still be a shallow disciple. Shallow discipleship can lead to narrow legalism, a private piety that focuses on routine, ritual and rules. I saw on Facebook the other day, "Your doctrinal purity may be as straight as a gun barrel--and just as empty!"

But here's what they lacked, v. 4: they abandoned their first love. And the word "abandoned" is the same Greek word used for divorce, give up on or leave. Augustine wrote in *Confessions* that disordered love is the heart of sin, and it always leads to misery and breakdown. The only thing

to do when our love becomes disordered is to hit the reset button and choose love God supremely. In 2:4, Christ reminds us that love for God and others is what fuels our joyful service. Without love, all work becomes drudgery. And remember: v. 2 tells us God knows our works, but v. 4 tells us God knows our hearts!

So what did the Ephesians need to do? What do we need to do? From v. 5, John Stott simply lists these three things: Remember, repent and resume [*What Christ Thinks of the Church*, p. 30]. Remember how it was when you were fresh in the Lord. Remember the energy, the joy you felt. Repent. It's not a feeling. It's an act of obedience, of returning, of changing mind and behavior. Resume. Start doing again the things that worked! Don't wait until you feel like it. Do it!

If you feel as if your heart has grown cold, don't wallow in guilt and leave in shame this morning. Consider the grace of God. When God saw the Ephesians, a church grown cold, what did God do? Abandon? No. He wrote a love letter, pleading, loving, beckoning. He comes after us. He comes after you. We are people of the resurrection. We can always come home. We serve the God of the resurrection. We can always begin again.

I remember a song which Cynthia Clawson used to sing: "Bring back the new again!/I want to see you again./Bring back the way it was/When we began./How did I miss the road?/When did I lose the glow?/And where did the wonder go?/Bring back the new again!" [words by Gordon Jensen].