

### ***Restoring the Testimony 1-20-01***

Nehemiah 1:2-4, Ezra 3:1-3, John 13:34,35

Would you come with me on a visit to a couple that recently moved to this city? They are getting ready to retire and looking for a slow paced job to wind down their last few working years. Jack had a fast paced job that was pretty stressful. His wife Ann was a schoolteacher. They were passing through on a vacation and fell in love with the place. They have a son who is a Junior in High School. On whim they decided to ask about work and before they knew it they were house hunting. You've probably met Jack and Ann. They may be your neighbors. But let me give you a bit of their religious background.

They used to attend a traditional mainline church. I don't think Jack or Ann ever really entered into a personal relationship with Christ. They liked the group and thought church was a nice thing to do, you know, love God and your country, and get to know nice people. Their son Matt went when they made him but was not interested in the youth group. He had a different crowd of friends. When the big fight broke out, the argument over the remodel project, well, let's just say, they decided that church was not the warm fuzzy place it used to be. They consider themselves Christians, but New Age is very intriguing to them. Now that they are here, maybe they will try some type of spirituality again.

While they were getting moved in they picked up a local paper. What's this? A pastor indicted for a felony? And then the Welcome Wagon comes and in the packet is a church invitation. The nice Welcome Wagon lady warns them not to go there. Lots of hush-hush stuff happening and they don't want to get into that mess. Then she relays the scandal of the last pastor and his secretary. They ask about the church down the road, but she lets them know it's a geriatric center. "No one within 25 years of your age," she warns. Though she appears to be 75 herself. She tells them that she gave up looking and watches a TV evangelist on Sunday morning. She let them know the channel and time.

Eventually a neighbor named Skystar invites them to the Mother Earth Worship Center. He seems sincerely friendly, and they even offer a complimentary massage after the worship time.

Let me pause in their story and address the condition of the broken down church of Jesus in this city. It is hard to do that without tears. It reminds me of Nehemiah inquiring of his brother about Jerusalem. Neh 1:2-4 (NIV)<sup>2</sup> *Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."<sup>4</sup> When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.*

I encourage you to read the prayer that follows. It is quite applicable for the church of today and much more needed than the Prayer of Jabez. 2 weeks ago we went over this prayer together with the prayer of Daniel in Daniel chapter 9. I can't shake the burden instilled in me through these prayers, nor do I want to. Allow me to personalize these verses we just read in a way that I think is in keeping with the type and shadow they represent. "One of my brothers came from (your home city) with some other men, and I questioned them about the survivors of the church splits and fallen pastors, and also about the church of your city. They said to me, "Those who survived the troubles and are still in the city are in great trouble and disgrace. The church is in shambles, one even closed their doors, and there is little or no thanksgiving." When I heard these things I sat down and wept.

I'll go no further into the sad testimony of the church here. Most of us know the stories too well. Instead I want us to focus this morning on what will restore the testimony of Jesus in this place. The testimony of Jesus is His sinless life full of the fruit of the Spirit, poured out in love for the lost and rejected. The world looks to believers to see that testimony in our lives. They should look to His word, but they don't know any better, so they look to us – after all, we are called – Christ –ians.

The restoration of the testimony must begin in individuals who are willing to lay down their personal preferences and desires, and instead, love with the love of Jesus. Wasn't this what drew people to follow Him? 1 Corinthians 12 describes all the gifts of the Spirit for building up the church, and then Paul says, "But I show you a more excellent way." And 1 Corinthians 13 follows – the way of love.

Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." Could it be that the church here is in such shambles because they have neglected this often-repeated command of Jesus? How did Jesus love us? Well, while we were sinners He died for us. That is, while we were living lives of rebellion against Him – living in destruction and ingratitude, He suffered the most ignoble death ever invented, out of love for us, that we might be right with God. Love like this costs a great deal. How much are we willing to pay that others know this love? Up until now I think the answer has been, "not nearly enough".

When there is conflict I, too often, refuse to surrender my right to first place. The Apostle Paul said we should prefer others above ourselves. I have not been willing to pay that price. Jesus preferred me above Himself and went to the cross. Imagine the testimony of the church in this city if we lived this kind of sacrificial love, willing to pay the price to be inconvenienced, take second or third or last place, to give until it hurts when there is a need in God's family. God gave until it hurt and then some for you. How far are we willing to go out of our comfort zone for the Kingdom of God and the testimony of Jesus?

When the Jews that came back to Jerusalem from exile with Nehemiah got settled, the very first thing they did was rebuild the altar of sacrifice. Let's read

how Ezra described it in Ezra 3:1-3 (NIV)<sup>1</sup> *When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.<sup>3</sup> Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.*

If we want to restore the testimony of Jesus in this city we must remember it begins with sacrifice. Just like these priests, we will be afraid. What if people take advantage of us? The walls are not rebuilt yet so we are kind of defenseless. If we just love one another wont we end up getting hurt? I'm so thankful Jesus didn't say, "But Father, if I love them to the end, the crucifixion will hurt." Yes, it will hurt, but that is what sacrifice is about. That is joining with Christ in His sufferings. These priests (by the way Jeshua is the Hebrew for Jesus) were afraid but they did what they knew should be done anyway.

This week someone asked me how many had been saved in this city recently? Well I do know of a few, a very few. Why so few? The Apostle Paul said it was the kindness of God that leads men to repentance. Where are the lost people seeing the kindness of God? Not a drive for numbers and points, to be the biggest and best but the kindness of God expressed through loving believers is what they need to see. They need to see love that is willing to pay the price, and go the distance.

The first place they will see it is in our relationships with one another. John 13:34-35 (NIV) <sup>34</sup> *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.<sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

How will they know we are His disciples? They will know when they see us love one another. In the letter to the Philippians Paul encouraged those fighting sisters to get along. "Be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose," he said. (Philippians 2:2) And how can we do that when we have such diverse opinions? We have to focus on our Savior and put ourselves last. We have to be more eager to hear than we are to speak. That is love. We have to let insignificant doctrines stay in the background and major on knowing Jesus, so we can allow His life to flow through us to all the needy ones around us.

Some of my brothers and sisters in the Lord make me crazy, but I love them. I will gladly give up my freedom of insisting on my viewpoint, because I know Christ died for them. Not only that, but the lost, for whom Jesus died, are watching. Are we going to act like disciples so they can see Jesus, or will we send them into the arms of Skystar?

Imagine a church where the love of Christ is the dominant characteristic. The Word of God must be clearly and simply presented, for John said the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy – speaking forth the word. The testimony of

Jesus must be a concern of all that attend and then it will soon be shared with guests by way of example as much as words. Imagine a church that is a place of peace and harmony. That is Jesus' intention for His body. He never meant for the leg to be competing with the arm, or the eye with the nose. This church we are envisioning is so overflowing with love that any guests just sense the peace immediately, and are welcomed in like long lost friends, and it's genuine – not a program! Could you stop people from flocking to that kind of a church? No way! And how fast would their testimony spread?

When Paul was in Corinth he heard about the church in Rome. Their testimony was going out around the world. So Paul prayed for them always. He had a heart for the testimony of Jesus and wanted that testimony in the capital of the world to go on shining bright. That's why he wrote the letter to the Romans. He was concerned for the testimony of Jesus, that it stays strong and pure, a witness to the world.

When I imagine that kind of a church I often forget the connection with the cost. It is not that the church is without conflict– it is just dealt with in preference to one another, in humility and love. The price is high – as we set aside our own desires out of love for one another. But don't forget why! Not only are we obeying our Lord, Whom we desire to please, but also there are many Jack and Anns out there, searching.

Let's go back to their story. Skystar got them to come, but the request for a tip after the complimentary massage and the weird channeling routine bothered Jack and Ann. Next week a person they met at work invited them to a church. The person was warm and sincere. They said "no" at first, but after that person invited them to their home for dinner, they felt more comfortable and decided to give it one more try.

That Sunday they never met so many warm and loving people. Everyone seemed genuinely glad they were there, because they sincerely were! As they listened to the message they felt a strange kind of tugging on their hearts. Jack and Ann will be back again, and again, and eventually they will yield their heart to Jesus. Their son will finish his education and Cornerstone Christian High School. It was Jesus' love in those folks that drew Jack's family to Christ. His love was demonstrated in people who practiced that love every week with difficult people, their brothers and sisters in Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:8 tells us, *"Love never fails."* It is the mortar to rebuild the broken walls of the church in this city. It is the mortar that will join church to church in cooperation instead of competition. It is the driving force in ministry to the dying, witnessing to the lost, and getting along with one another. Love for God is first, of course, but that love manifests itself in love for one another. The same John the Beloved that recorded the new command of Jesus to love one another wrote, 1 John 4:20-21 (NIV) *"<sup>20</sup> If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has*

*seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.<sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."*

How do we receive this love of Christ that compels us? I remember when I was just 18, asking the Lord to give me a love for His word. I prayed that every night with a sincere heart and He answered, and is still answering. Pray! Pray for a love for one another, for the body of Christ in Sedona. Pray for His love to flow through your heart in His humble and generous way. Pray for a heart that is willing to pay the price to demonstrate such a love. Pray for a willingness to be taken advantage of as long as the testimony of Jesus is clearly seen. Pray you will meet Jack and Ann and be a picture of the love of Christ to them.

If the testimony of Jesus is to change in this city, if the church is to be restored, it must begin in us. It must begin in believers who see the need and are willing to pay the price. I guess it boils down to this: Will you obey Jesus command? He will not make you obey. You must be willing.

This Apostle John was the only disciple who was not martyred, not because people didn't try. In his old age the early church fathers tell us that he was carried to the worship service in his chair. He had the strength to say just a few words. What would this last remaining great Apostle say, his last lesson he would repeat again and again to the Christians at the church of Ephesus? "Little children, love one another." One frustrated brother finally asked him, "Why do you keep repeating that?" John said, "When this is done, all is done." What did he mean by that? You can't love your brother unless you genuinely love God. If you love your brother the world will know you are His disciples. The world will see the testimony of Jesus in you.

Will you choose this morning to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and let that love be demonstrated in loving those who God loves? Will you pray for that love to grip your heart for a lost neighbor or acquaintance? Will you be willing to pay the price as Jesus did for you, to put yourself last, to humble yourself, to see God's Kingdom advance? With God nothing shall be impossible – even restoring the testimony of the church of this city. Pray!