

# BELPRES CHURCH

**Sermon Title: First Love**

**Scott Scruggs**

*Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.*

---

## **Scripture:**

---

### **Revelation 2:2-5**

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

---

## **Transcript:**

---

Hello, BelPres. I'm not with you today because I'm preaching at North Shore Church in Kirkland and North Shore's pastor Scott Scruggs is preaching here. We're exchanging pulpits for the day and Scott and I have been friends for 28 years. We built a college ministry together in California and then five years ago, he moved here to lead North Shore Church. Scott has been instrumental to my spiritual growth and he has pointed me to Jesus countless times and he is one of the wisest men I know. At various points along the way, he has given me a word from the Lord that was truly life-changing, including being the last person I spoke to before I made my final decision whether or not to come here, and he encouraged me to come here. So Scott is connected to our church, invested in our church. So would you please give a warm welcome to my very good friend, Scott Scruggs.

Thank you. Well, thank you. It's really, really good to be here. It's actually an honor to be here. As Scott said, my name is also Scott, although I go by Scotty in many ways because when we worked at the same church he was, Scott and I got called Scotty, so that's how that worked. We're swapping churches today and it's an honor to be here. I will just say, if you're concerned, Scott and I are quite similar in a number of ways. He was a graduate student at Stanford when I did my undergrad there. He has a PhD in English. I have a bachelor's in

English. So this message will be a lot like what you normally hear, just slightly dumber. Honestly, the reason I'm so excited to be here is because your pastor is the reason why I'm a pastor.

Scott and I met again, about 28 years ago. He's been a friend, a mentor, a father figure. He introduced me to the grace of Jesus in a way that I'd never knew was possible. He saw gifts in me that I didn't know I had. He's walked with me through the highs and the lows. He married, my wife, Nina and me and we are still close friends. We meet every Thursday afternoon still to this day and I know you have been blessed by his leadership, his pastoring, his teaching, his care. He has served this church faithfully for 20 years. So here's what I want you all to do today. This is kind of your one homework assignment out of this message. I want you to actually get on your computer or phone today and email Scott and say, thank you for being my pastor. Okay? Nothing else. Just if you get bored in the message, pull out your phone, you can do it right then and just say, "Thank you for being my pastor."

Can we all agree to do that? I think it would really bless him, and here's the thing, I want him to have to reply to a thousand emails. I think that'll be a lot of fun and just so you know, I'm not just indebted to Scott, I'm actually indebted to you. None of you will know this, but I actually was under care of this church in my ordination process, which means I was a member of this church for many years. Although now, I'm on staff at another church who I think I've officially been dismembered, but I was a member here for many years. I was ordained in a Presbyterian church, so this church has played a huge role in my life and I'm just so grateful for it. I know there are so many people that you don't even know around this area, all over the world who are so deeply grateful for the ministry, the leadership, the voice, the love of this body.

So I'm honored. I'm honored to be with you today. Here's what I want to get started. I want to get started actually with a word of affirmation for each of you, just for showing up. So here's the thing, you get credit today just for showing up because here's the thing, and some of you know this, Barnard did some research recently around this, and they found that during the pandemic, one out of every three Christians, self-described, Christians dropped out of church entirely, one out of three. And many others have left their church to go to another church. Maybe you have friends who've done that. Some of you may be here from my church. So hi, I'm back with you again, but I just want to say way to go. After all the difficulty, all the division, all the challenges, all the turmoil, and here you are worshipping Jesus. Way to go.

That's the good news. Maybe the not so good news is that the challenges of this past season ... and you know, we've all lived through them in many ways, the challenges didn't just challenge us or change us. I believe the challenges of the season also revealed us. Here's what I mean. I believe the challenges revealed gaps in our faith. Flaws in how we go about being disciples of Jesus. I think we've seen this in the church in America today because that's kind of what challenges do, right? They don't just change us or grow us, they expose us. They reveal us for who we actually are. Kind of a funny story illustration of that, I heard a pastor named Pete Hughes tell a story, what he called a discipleship revealing moment with his seven year old son.

Pete and his family were away at this church conference together, and at the conference, a water fight broke out. Have you ever been to a camp and maybe a water fight breaks out. It breaks out for the whole camp. Everybody has kind of got the water balloons and water guns and all that kind of stuff, and during the battle, one of the other adults came up behind Pete's son and poured an entire bucket of water on his head. He's seven years old, so he was just livid. He was so mad, so frustrated. He used some words you won't find in the Bible. He runs back to his tent and Pete has to go find him, talk to him, console him. Pete thought everything was okay until later that night, the very same guy who poured the water over his head said, "Pete, I think I really upset your son."

He said, "No, no, no, no, he's fine. I talked to him, it's okay." He said, "No, no, no. You see your son wrote me a letter and he pulls out this letter and he hands it to Pete and Pete is just praying. This letter says something like, "Dear sir, you really upset me, but my mom and dad have been teaching me about Jesus and so I've decided to forgive you." That's what Pete was hoping it said, but when he opened the letter, there were only four words. It just said, "I hope you die." Pete said that was a discipleship revealing moment for him and his family, right? Challenges don't just shape who we are. They reveal who we are. When you look back at the last few years, and I believe we can all do this maybe for ourselves, for our lives, for our churches, and the churches we know. When you look back at how the American churches handled its fear or the division or the disappointment, I think we've been exposed as well.

Not always as quick to listen, but often quick to blame or condemn or shout or curse. Not always as devoted to the teaching of Jesus, but often, devoted to the political right or the political left. Not as willing to love our enemies, but ready to cancel them or condemn them and just so you know, I'm not just pointing the finger at you, I've seen that at work in my own life as well. So over these past few months, I've just found myself praying this really simple prayer, Jesus, what would you want to say to the church today? If you just appeared in person and you could just say a prophetic word over your church today, what would you say? What words of encouragement would you have? What words of correction would you share?

To answer that prayer, God led me, this is kind of a duh moment for a pastor. God led me to the one place in the Bible where Jesus speaks to actual churches. I mean you know from the gospels, he speaks to his disciples about the church, but it's only in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, do you find red letters in your Bible of Jesus speaking to actual churches, seven to be exact and none more relevant, more pertinent to what we're living through in our culture today than that very first one, that letter to the church in a city called Ephesus. Now, imagine some of you have been to the ruins of Ephesus in modern day Turkey. So it's a remarkable place At the time that the Apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation, Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. It was a major financial center.

It was a port city along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was the home to a sporting event called the Panionian game, second only to the Olympics in size and scope. It was a home of a

certain temple called the Temple of Artemis, which is not just a rocket that may or may not make it around the moon. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world in that day, and it was a destination for idolatry and sexual promiscuity. So let's just think about it for a moment. A major port city on the west coast, a financial and business center, a hub for sports and entertainment and a center for idolatry and sexual promiscuity. Does that not sound like a part of the world we all know. In spite of all that, Ephesus had a thriving church presence. The church that was there, you know the story from Acts was founded by the Apostle Paul himself and he led in that church longer than any of his other churches, three years.

After Paul, the church was led by Timothy, another person from the Bible. Then, after Timothy, it was led by the Apostle John, himself and get this, you might know this story, when John was leading the church in Ephesus, Mary, the mother of Jesus was thought to have attended that church. Just think about Mary sitting on the front row in a Christmas Eve service, right? The choir is singing, the little Lord Jesus, crying he makes and Mary is like, you want to bet? Were any of you actually there? I was actually there for the story. It had this incredible leadership resume, and even more important was its ministry resume. Here's what I want to get into the text today. Look at what Jesus says about the church in Ephesus. He says, "I know your deeds, your hard work, your perseverance." I think that would be words that could express how BelPres walked through these last three years.

I know all the amazing things you've been doing. I know you cannot tolerate wicked people that you've tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false. You have persevered and endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary. In other words, this is a faithful church. This is an effective church. This is a great church. This is a church that you'd want to attend if you were there, I want to be the church in Ephesus. They built world class ministries. They persevered through challenging seasons. They resisted compromise. Jesus is saying, "I know, I know, I see it," and by the way, Jesus sees all the faithful work you do in your life. Did you know that? It's kind of a side note in the message, but he knows how generous you've been, even though your portfolio is down. He knows about the forgiveness you offered even if it wasn't received well.

He knows the prayers you've been faithfully praying, even if you don't have the answer you want, yet he knows, he knows, he knows. He sees it and especially in difficult times to remember that Jesus actually knows, where his people have been faithful and he knows they've been faithful in Ephesus. He says, "I know how much you love scripture. I know how much you love serving. I know how much you love doctrine." There's just one problem. You don't love Jesus anymore. Look at what he says. He says, "Yet this I hold against you church in Ephesus, you have forsaken or abandoned or left behind the love you had at first." In other words, you're focused on everything but the one thing that matters most, your love for Jesus.

So how's your love for Jesus going? Not your activity for Jesus or your involvement in church or your small group or the book you're reading or the leadership you're doing. How's your love for

Jesus going? I actually still remember when I first fell in love with my wife Nina, I have a picture of my family to show you. Here we are. It's a little crew. That's my wife Nina, that's our daughter Nora, who's five and a half, our son Jude, who's two and a half. We've been through an adventure as a young family over the past few years. Many of you, have been through kind of an adventure as well, but I can still remember, I still remember those first love days when I first met Nina and started to fall in love with her. I remember the first time I asked her out and she said, yes.

I remember the first time I asked if we could be boyfriend and girlfriend and she said yes. I actually remember the very first time I asked if I could kiss her. Any guesses on what she said? Some of the last service said, no. Sometimes they said, no, that's not very encouraging, but she said, yes. We've been married for six months, but she finally said yes, right? She finally gave in, and it goes that way for some of us guys. I know, right? The season of first love, it's this amazing season. You want to spend time together. You want to get to know each other and nothing feels like a chore or responsibility, does it? Of course, as you know in life, that season of first love can fade as the demands and responsibilities and pressures of life begin to set in.

Here's the reality, the same thing can happen with our life with Jesus, and I know because it's happened to me. I'll just be honest. That's actually happened in my life. I grew up in a Christian home, but it wasn't until I was in college that the love of Jesus broke into my life in this transformative way, and I fell so in love with who he is, and in that season, it wasn't hard to pray, it wasn't hard to go to church, it wasn't hard to worship. I was at a traditional Presbyterian church, so worship meant taking my hands out of my pockets, but I was passionate about worship. It wasn't hard. It wasn't a chore. It wasn't difficult, but over time, that passion, that intimacy began to be overshadowed by things like duty, responsibility. I start to focus ... maybe you'll get this, I started focusing on doing things for Jesus instead of doing things with Jesus.

I definitely still thought I loved him. In fact, if you had asked me the time, I would've said, "Of course, I love him. I mean, look at all the things I do for him. Look at my life. Look at my ministry resume. Look at my leadership. Of course, I love him." The reality is I had left my love for Jesus behind, and there's a beautiful picture that's actually in scripture in gospel of Luke. Some of you know the story. Jesus is just 12 years old. His parents are in Jerusalem for the Passover, and at the celebration or after the celebration, his parents pack up and they start the journey home, not realizing they leave Jesus behind at the temple. You know that story? Luke puts it this way. I love this. He writes, "Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day." A day.

I've had my share of parenting fails, but I've never lost a kid for a whole day. I mean, I've wanted to, but I've never lost a kid for a whole day. They left him for a day. Why? Because they just assumed he was there. They just assumed he was with him. We do this too. We get so focused on life, career, family, work, relationships until somewhere along the way we say, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, where's God? Why don't I feel his presence anymore? Why does he seem so distant?" It's because we've been busy with other things, assuming he's just plotting along in our company. Jesus is saying, "No, that's not how that works." In fact, there are real consequences to this. Later in the letter to Ephesus, he warns them.

If this happens, the church will lose its light, meaning the building might remain, the budget might remain, but it's no longer pointing people to Jesus. It's become a really good nonprofit or worse, a church becomes like we've seen in many churches in our day recently, over the past few years, it becomes some version of Christianity that looks nothing like Christ and friends, this can happen to any church just like it can happen to you, and it can happen to me. Which is why Jesus gave the church in Ephesus a really clear wake up call. He says to them, "Consider how far you've fallen," he says. In other words, when was the last time dot, dot, dot. Let me give you a few examples. When was the last time you woke up just overwhelmed with gratitude that Jesus was in your life or when was the last time you came to church and you couldn't wait to worship?

I can't wait to get to express my gratitude to who God is, or when was the last time you scheduled an entire afternoon just to be with Jesus? Can you even be honest with yourself about how long it's been? Jesus is saying, just a minute. Consider how far you've fallen, how long it's actually been. Then, he says, I love this part. "Repent and do the things you did at first." In other words, this is not going to be about ... you don't need a theology degree, you don't have to go to seminary to fix this. Go back and do what you did at first because at first, you just wanted to be with him. At first, you just wanted to spend time with him and feel close. At first, you just wanted Jesus, not all the stuff you thought he could do for you. We need to go back to that and like any relationship that takes time and intentionality.

If you're taking notes today, two words, you need time and intentionality, time and intentionality, because if we're going to fall in love with Jesus, you got to spend time with Jesus. When I say spend time with him, I'm not just talking about have him in the back of your mind while you're doing other stuff. Actually, put time with Jesus on the calendar. Because guess what, if he's not on the calendar, you won't do it, right? You have to ... and intentionality, you have to actually want to grow closer to him because just taking time to pray or read the Bible doesn't mean you actually want to fall in love with him. You could do all that stuff and get focused on lots of other things, right? This past week I was playing with our two year old and I got my phone out to check my calendar, just wanted to check for something real, real quick.

When I was looking at my phone, he slipped and almost fell down our stairs, but caught him. I grabbed him right before he fell. I pulled into my arms and said, "I'm sorry buddy. I'm sorry buddy. I'm so sorry but I've got you. I won't lose sight of you again, and please don't tell your mommy about this. Please don't do that." See friends, Jesus knows your heart. He knows your heart. He knows if you want to grow closer or if you're always preoccupied with other things. He knows if you're excited to be with him or if it's all just kind of a chore to something you ought to do, he knows. By the way, if it feels like a chore of you today, don't panic, just admit it. I've been there. Just admit it and then pray. It's a great prayer for you. Jesus, help me want to want you again. Just help me, want to want you again because I don't feel it anymore.

By the way, that prayer is enough to get you back on the right track. How do I know? Because here's the good news about this whole falling in love with Jesus thing, it didn't start with you falling in love with him. It started with him falling in love with you. It didn't start with you pursuing him. It started with him pursuing you. It didn't start when you surrendered your life to him. It started when he surrendered his life for you. That's what the cross of Jesus is all about. It's not God saying, "Please, please love me." It's God saying, "I loved you first." And it's only when we cling to his love and our love for him that we can sustain faith through pandemics and recessions and problems and pain. How do I know that's true? Because when Jesus was put on that cross and everybody ran away, including all of his disciples, there was one disciple who remained behind.

Anybody, remember who it was? John. Same John that wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus. The same John that walked with Jesus for three years of his life. The same John who referred to himself not just as the disciple whom Jesus saved or called or redeemed, but the one whom Jesus loved. Because only the ones who love him stay with him. Friends, only the ones who actually love him will stay with him. What a difference it will all make in the world, if that's us too. So here's my closing question, I know out of time, how's your love for Jesus really going? What do you want to do you want to do in your life to rekindle that love for him? Let me pray. Jesus, I'm so grateful for your love for us, for your sacrifice for us, for your pursuit of us, for everything in your life. It's all about displaying your great love for us.

Yet, I know in my own life I have fallen out of that love so many times into busyness, activity, routine and religion. I confess it Lord, and we want to confess that we need you now to rekindle the spark, that passion and love and devotion because that's what will keep us with you to the end, and we pray this your name and everybody said, amen.

---

### **Discussion Questions:**

---

*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How would you assess your love for or intimacy with Jesus in your life?
- What has been lost or has shifted since your first met Jesus?
- How do you plan to rekindle that love/devotion?
- Are you willing to ask Him to help you want to love him again?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.