

How to Have Communion with Christ

Text:

Revelation 3:14-22

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Introduction:

Laodicea finds itself at the end of the road both geographically and spiritually. We have come to the end of the circuit. Of all of the seven churches Laodicea is the most spiritually impoverished. Her situation is desperate, and she does not even realize it. There is no worse condition than to think that you are healthy when in reality you are dying, or to think that you are rich when in reality your wealth is false wealth that is about to disappear.

Christ describes the spiritual condition of Laodicea with an image they would have clearly understood. Laodicea was a prosperous town, but it lacked one important necessity, a supply of good water. Its water supply came by aqueduct from hot springs located at Hierapolis six miles away. By the time it reached Laodicea it was neither hot nor cold but lukewarm and filled with sediment. Cold water is good for drinking, and hot water for washing, but lukewarm, sediment-filled water is good for neither. What Christ is emphasizing by this image is uselessness. This is the reason he says: "I would that you were either hot or cold", in which case they would have been useful, but as they were they had become of no use to him or his kingdom.

This is serious. None of us want to find ourselves useless. So let us first ask the question: Why have they become useless? We will then look at the error that let them to this condition, and finally examine what they can do to recover.

I. The Failure of Laodicea

Laodicea had lost the most basic reality of Christian existence, a living relationship with Jesus Christ. The power of the Christian Faith is found in the fact that Christ is alive and present in his church. Jesus had emphasized this to his disciples while he was still on earth. Where he lays it out most clearly is in the farewell discourse of John 13-16. As he speaks to them on the night of his arrest he makes it clear to them that although he is going to leave them and return to his Father, he will still be with them. The full impact of this reality can only be grasped by a study of all that he and the apostles have to say about it in the New Testament, but let me illustrate it with a couple of passages from the above-mentioned passage. First listen to what he says to his disciples and to us in John 14:22-26:

Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Notice first of all that in verse 23 Jesus clearly says that both he and the Father will come and make their home with the believer. By saying this he is making it clear that the normal Christian life is a life lived in communion with God. If we are living as he intended for us to live as his followers we should be experiencing the reality of God. Christ should not be a remote historic figure, but someone as close to us as the people with whom we live and share our existence.

Secondly, notice that he brings up two things that are keys to this reality. In verse 22 Judas (not Iscariot) asks him a question based on what Jesus had just said to them: "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" The rest of the passage is the answer to this question. The first part of the answer is that he will become real to us when we live in active obedience to his word. This is a reminder of what we have already seen on more than one occasion in looking at this series of letters, but that we especially saw at Philadelphia. The key to communion with Christ, the key to being useful in Christ's service is hearing his word and doing it. Just as Jesus says here: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will

love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” The second key is what he says in verse 26: “. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you”. We are not alone. God is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit and the Word we have the power to live in communion with Christ. When we do we are useful to him, we bear fruit that brings glory to God and fulfills the purpose for which Christ saved us and made us God’s children, but when we do not we, like the Laodiceans become useless.

The second passage to illustrate this reality comes from the image of the vine and the branches in John 15. I quote a part of it:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:1-8).

The key phrase in this passage is when Jesus says in verse 4, “apart from me you can do nothing.” Cut off from Christ, we are powerless and useless, neither hot nor cold, but tepid and revolting. The Laodiceans had cut themselves off from the rootstalk, Christ, and in so doing they had lost their usefulness to Christ, and worse yet, they were unaware of their condition. What had let them to this dangerous and deplorable state of affairs?

II. The Cause of the Failure

We detect the cause of their failure in Christ’s words of condemnation. He says to them: “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” They thought they were rich when, in fact, they were poor. They had been misled about their spiritual condition. Not only did they think they were rich, but the word that is translated: “I have prospered”, indicates that they took credit for their enrichment, they considered it of their own doing. This, of course, runs completely across the

grain of genuine Christian understanding. We know that all of our riches come from Christ. We have not enriched ourselves, but in Christ we have been made rich. What then is the source of this grievous error?

Again the passage contains an image that would have been crystal clear to its original audience. Laodicea was a wealthy city and the foundation of its wealth was its banking, its medical school especially known for its eye ointment, and its wool industry which was especially known for a special glossy black wool that came from a special species of sheep that is now extinct. This is the reason Christ counsels them to buy true gold so that they might be really rich, white garments to cover their nakedness, and salve to anoint their eyes so that they might see spiritually. Based on these images some have taken the problem of the Laodiceans to be materialism. Having material riches they do not see the need of Christ. This is possible, and it is certainly a danger that we who live in prosperous places can identify with. However, there is most likely something deeper here.

Laodicea was close to Colosse. There are several parallels between what Christ says to the Laodiceans here and what Paul says to the Colossians in the Epistle to the Colossians. It is likely that the Laodicean church had become infected with the same kind of false teaching that was threatening Colosse when Paul wrote to them, something that had led them away from Christ. Remember what Paul says in Colossians 2:1-4:

“For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and *for* them at Laodicea, and *for* as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words.

The Laodiceans had been led away from the basic truth that all of God’s treasures, all of his riches come to us in Jesus Christ. It is only in a living relationship with the living Christ that we experience the full blessings of God. We must let no one entice us with any other teaching. To do so is to cut ourselves off from the vine, and the branch cut off from the vine is good for nothing. This is what happened in Laodicea. Whatever they had replaced Christ with had become for them spiritual riches, but it was in reality false riches. They had been deceived and their deception had led to spiritual poverty.

III. The Cure for the Failure

As desperate as the situation is, there is still hope. Christ still affirms his love for them and gives them counsel. They must repent. They must recognize that the goods they have purchased from the heresy vendors are fake and worthless. They must rid themselves of it and purchase from him the real thing. Some have had a difficult time with the idea of purchasing from Christ. Are his gifts not free? Isaiah 55:1-2 is the answer to the question:

“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for *that which is* not bread? and your labour for *that which* satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye *that which is* good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.”

Many like the Laodiceans spend great wealth and effort trying to obtain that which has already been freely provided for them in Jesus Christ. The blessings of Christ are purchased without money and effort on our part. He has already paid the price. The only thing that deprives us of them is our own unwillingness to receive them. Thus Christ extends to us what may be the most beautiful invitation in the Bible when he says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” The only thing keeping Christ out of our lives is our unwillingness to let him in. Genuine spiritual life begins and is sustained by openness to Jesus Christ.