

Christ, The Searcher of Men's Hearts

Christ loves his church. He gave His life for it, and said the gates of hell won't prevail against it. Jesus Himself is the foundation stone of this church. And Scripture tells us His glory and wisdom dwell in it. At Pentecost, He sent His Holy Spirit to establish the church. And He has gifted it with anointed servants — pastors, teachers, apostles, prophets and evangelists — for the purpose of building it up.

It's clear the Lord desires to bless his church. So, why does Revelation 2 present such a fearsome picture of Christ, when He appears to His people? John writes that Jesus comes to the church with flaming eyes and a thundering voice:

“In the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man... His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword” (REV 1:13-16).

Now, Revelation is the summation of God's Word. It describes the end of all things. And here is the first image of Christ we see in this book. Why does Jesus appear so foreboding here? And why does He speak so piercingly to His church? John writes that Christ's words are as sharp as swords, cutting down to the marrow. Remember, this was the apostle who leaned his head on Jesus' bosom. But now he finds himself on his face: *“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead”* (1:17).

The Lord Himself explains His awesome appearance: *“All the churches shall know that I am he*

which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works” (2:23). The fact is, Christ loves His church. And that's the very reason He comes to search it. He comes to correct His people in love, to purify them.

First of all, Jesus tells John not to be afraid. *“He laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last”* (1:17). Then Christ says, in essence, “I want everyone in My church to know I've come to search their inner man. And I do it with eyes of fire and a thunder that shakes the soul. I won't mince words — what I have to say will both pierce and heal. But I won't allow any child of Mine to continue in apathy or blindness. My eyes and mouth will pierce through every facade.”

Christ saw something in His church. And He instructed John to write down His words and send them to the seven “angels” of the churches. This refers to His ministers, calling them the stars in His hands (see 1:16). He's telling John, “I love these servants. I've called and anointed them. And now you're to deliver My words to them.”

As a pastor myself, I have to wonder: what must it have been like to open such a letter from John? “Unto the pastor of the church in New York: Thus saith the Lord, concerning your

congregation...” Now imagine what those seven ministers felt.

Take, for example, the pastor at Ephesus. As he reads John's letter, he sees Christ rejoicing over his church. The Lord commends the Ephesians for being hardworking, patient and discerning. They hate evil, and they stand up for the cause of Christ. And through the years, they've never stopped doing good deeds. This pastor marvels at what he reads. He thinks, “Wow, the Lord is pleased with us. It's a letter of commendation.”

But as he reads on, he comes upon piercing words: *“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love”* (2:4). Jesus warns the pastor, *“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick”* (2:5).

The Ephesian pastor must have been aghast at this. He thinks, “Repent? Or he'll remove our witness? What shocking words. How could this be? We're covenant believers. We're justified by faith. We've been charitable, loving, caring. Now we're supposed to go back and be as we were at the beginning? What does that mean? How can this be Jesus speaking? How could I ever read this letter to my congregation?”

Keep in mind, these words are directed to a godly congregation.

So, this had to be a deeply serious matter in the Lord's eyes. Why else would he speak so searchingly to such a shining example of a church? He's telling the pastor, "Your first love for Me isn't what it once was. You've neglected communion with Me. Now, repent." Jesus makes it clear: it all has to do with His presence. Yes, the Ephesians had labored diligently in doing good works. But they were no longer intimate with the Lord.

In the next chapter, Christ sums up his message to all seven pastors and their congregations. And His words are telling: "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me*" (3:20). Too often, Christians don't open up the doors of their hearts to Jesus. When He knocks, they're not even home. Instead, there's a sign on the door, saying, "Dear Lord, I'm off to minister at the hospital, then later at the jail. See you in church."

So many churches today are doing so many good, charitable things in Christ's name. They have programs for almost every human need. And the congregation lives clean, upright lives, careful to avoid sin. But something has changed about them. At one time, these believers were devoted to their communion with Jesus. They wouldn't go a single day without spending time alone with Him. But now things are different. All they give Him is a quick greeting on their way to some work. How serious is this to Jesus?

Christ takes our communion so seriously, He'll remove the one element that reaches lost souls: His presence.

Jesus is warning us, "Something has been lost in My church. It's My awesome presence. You have to get back to the secret closet, back to supping with Me. Otherwise, I'll remove My presence from you. All your good works — your preaching, evangelism and giving — must flow out of our time together. It has to come from My table."

The church at Ephesus had lost something they once possessed. It was the manifest presence of Christ in their midst. They'd begun to take Jesus' presence for granted, and it was affecting their

ministry. At one time, they loved and cared for one another. But now they took each other for granted as well. And that had a disastrous effect on their labors to do good works. They were so busy serving people that their deeds became the focus, not the love of Christ. His powerful presence was missing.

Now Jesus warned them: "If you don't make changes — if you don't return to your hunger for Me — I'm going to take away your testimony. You'll no longer have any authority when you do your good works. They'll all be for naught."

I see a parallel in the world today. Some of the hardest people I've known are those who've worked for welfare departments and social agencies. This is especially true of those who worked in mental wards or with abused children. These people were sincere, dedicated workers. But it was just too painful for them to face the suffering they witnessed daily. Over time, some have hardened themselves.

The same thing can happen to Christians. Ministers and lay servants alike see so much pain and sin in the people they minister to, they can grow hard. That's just what Jesus was saying to this pastor at Ephesus: "You once were so tender with others. You had such a love for people, and you listened to them. But now you turn a deaf ear. You sit with them, but you've hardened yourself to their cries. You're doing ministry on a treadmill, with no life. I have no choice but to remove My presence from you."

I've been in churches where the Lord has removed his presence for a season. There's a deadness and dryness that's almost tangible. Everyone can sense it. God is speaking to that church, saying, "I'll let things go cold for a while. I want to bring you out of your lethargy. I want you to know what it's like without My presence." It's absolutely horrible when a church reaches this point. There's no conviction of the Holy Ghost, nothing to move the congregation, nothing to touch the young people.

Another serious side effect takes place. That is, spiritually hungry people won't stay where Jesus' presence isn't evident. They're desperate to know His nearness. And when they don't experience it,

they go somewhere else to find it. I receive many letters with the same complaint: "I can't find a church that's alive with the Lord's presence."

I've witnessed the tragic backsliding of many Christians who've felt this way. They never do find a church. So they end up sitting at home and watching preachers on TV. They never get any meat in their spiritual diet. Everything they dine on is lightness. Over time, a coldness sets in. Soon they've abandoned church altogether. They neglect the assembly of the brethren, which Hebrews warns against (see Hebrews 10:25). And they become totally indifferent to Christ and his presence.

I tell you, God won't hear any excuses from such people. Jesus can be anyone's all in all, if you continue your personal communion with Him. It doesn't matter what the condition of your church is; you're to be diligent in giving Him precious time. You need to drink deeply of His presence if you want His Word to come alive to you.

In light of Revelation 1-3, every believer must ask himself: "Have my good works — my Bible studies and my service — robbed me of time with Jesus? Do I still hunger for Him as I once did? Or have I lost something?"

Christ searches His people's hearts in every age, with a concern for spiritual blindness.

The churches Jesus addresses in Revelation 2-3 were seven literal congregations in Asia. Some Bible scholars believe these churches represent seven eras in the church's history. I don't want to argue that theological point. I simply believe the message here is for Christians of every generation. In short, Jesus searches His people's hearts in every age. He's concerned for any spiritual blindness that plagues His church.

The Lord had a controversy with five of the seven churches in this passage. I want to focus on just three: Ephesus, Thyatira, and Laodicea.

We've already seen that the problem at Ephesus was a lack of intimacy with Christ. The problem in Thyatira was different. It was a

flirtation with seductive, devilish ministries. Imagine the pastor's reaction when he read these words: *"Unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire"* (REV 2:18). Jesus saw this church through flaming eyes of holy anger.

Yet the letter continues with a commendation: *"I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first"* (2:19). Once again, Christ is saying, "I know your deeds. Your love, faith, service and perseverance are greater now than when you began." Best of all, the Lord tells them, "I know you love Me." He doesn't reprimand them for a loss of intimacy with Him.

But then we read these piercing words: *"Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols"* (2:20).

Who, exactly, is the Jezebel mentioned here? Jesus is speaking of false shepherds. He's reproving the pastor in Thyatira for tolerating covetous ministers who seduce his people: "You allow lust-filled ministers to speak freely from your pulpit. They come in as angels of light, and they use wicked deceptions to seduce My people."

The Jezebel reference here indicates more than just ministers who are covetous. These false shepherds actually invent schemes to carry out and fulfill their lusts. Simply put, the name Jezebel is a byword for all that's evil and detestable in the eyes of the Lord.

What a perplexing picture we're given. Here are a people who love the Lord, devoted men and women of God. They've persevered, they've given faithfully, and they love Jesus. How could these believers be attracted to false prophets? How could they ever be seduced by wicked ministers whom God despises?

This may shock you, but I see this very thing happening all across this land. Wolves who are out to fleece the flock now speak in churches once known for their holiness message. When the pastor is asked why he permits this, he

admits, "These preachers draw a crowd. People are coming to church." Yet he's allowing false prophets to serve the food of satan himself: a self-centered gospel of covetousness.

Do you note an inconsistency here? Jesus calls the pastor at Thyatira a man of love and goodness. Yet this same man tolerates ministers of abominable sin, shepherds who excite people's flesh and cater to their lusts. They bring in wicked concepts that cause a false sense of revival. And they lead the people into demonic seductions.

Deep in this pastor's heart, he knows their gospel isn't pure. But he doesn't want to stop the crowds from coming. And now Christ is telling him, "You tolerate these wolves' seductions. And you're blind to what it's doing to your people. They're slipping away to these preachers' meetings. And they're being led down to destruction. They've begun fornicating and eating food sacrificed to idols. But you refuse to warn them. I've called you to be a shepherd over My sheep, but you're not protecting them. Why do you tolerate this evil? Why won't you raise your voice?"

One of the first obligations any pastor has is to keep the pulpit pure. He can't allow someone to stand in it and deliver a false word. That may sound like a control issue to you, but it's what God demands. You see, Christ isn't talking about sexual fornication here. He's speaking of an evil yoke, a sensual fellowship, a giving of oneself to the power of a false ministry. And Jesus' warning is clear: "You're dining on an excitement that's of flesh. It's a lust-pleasing gospel. And your spiritual life is at stake."

Remember, these aren't backslidden believers Jesus is addressing. He's talking to loving Christians who'd give you anything they have. But they're attracted to a gospel of flesh. They pay heed to a subtle voice that whispers, "You have to hear this man speak."

All through the gospels, Jesus warns of false shepherds who come seeking to devour and deceiving many. Yet I'm shocked by the lack of discernment in multitudes who abide their false gospels. Has this happened to

you? Does your soul feed on some TV gospel that's actually demonic? Do you drink in a message from prosperity preachers who appeal to your lusts and take the last dimes of the elderly?

You may think, "What harm is there in watching them? It can't hurt me to hear what they say. Besides, it all feels like it's from the Lord." No! If you abide wicked shepherds, then you're in bed with demons. You're committing fornication with evil.

Don't misunderstand: I'm not talking about every TV evangelist. But discerning Christians know the difference. Jesus speaks of such well-grounded saints, who see through the motives of flesh-driven preachers: *"(They) have not known the depths of Satan"* (REV 2:24). Christ doesn't mince words about these money-grabbing ministers. He's saying, "They drag souls down to the very depths of hell." Yes, these ministers preach Christ, but not the Christ of glory. Yes, they preach a word, but it isn't Christ's Word. It's a gospel tainted with doctrines of demons.

The Lord says of such evil shepherds, *"I gave (Jezebel) space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not"* (2:21). He's saying, in essence, "I've been patient with these false prophets and evangelists. I've given them warning after warning. They've had plenty of time to turn from their wickedness. But they've refused."

Then the Lord issues this warning to every righteous minister of His Word: *"Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death"* (2:22-23). Jesus isn't just talking about false prophets here. He's including everyone who listens to them and supports them. They all end up together in an awful condition of sickness and spiritual death.

Ezekiel says such believers commit *"fornications on every one that passed by"* (EZ 16:15). In other words: "You run after all these false ministers. But they just use you. They make merchandise of you, leaving you wounded and spiritually dead."

Finally, Jesus admonishes those who've faithfully stood against Jezebel ministers: *"That which ye*

have already hold fast till I come" (2:25). He's saying, "You've learned true discernment. You won't let yourself be twisted by every wind and wave of doctrine. So, for now, just keep holding on. Don't allow yourself to be deceived. That's all I ask. I won't put any other burden on you till I come back" (see 2:24).

I wouldn't want to be the Laodicean pastor who opens his letter from Jesus.

Jesus doesn't give a single commendation to the church at Laodicea. Instead, this pastor reads, "*I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth*" (REV 3:15-16). What terrifying words from the Lord.

My question is, how can an entire church fall into the same dangerous condition? How can everyone be so spiritually blinded that all of them become lukewarm? There's no mention of a holy remnant in this body. Christ describes them all as "*wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*" (3:17). How could this be? How can anybody be miserable, poor and naked, and yet not know it?

It happened because these people were blinded by a horrible lie. The Laodiceans were very materialistic, wealthy and prospering. (This could mean increasing in numbers and influence, as well as in money.) And they were totally satisfied with themselves.

To non-discerning Christians, this church was thriving. People loved it and were attracted to it. But when Christ searched it out, he was appalled by what he saw. These Laodiceans were blinded by a lie. And that lie was, "I'm okay. I'm where I ought to be spiritually. I haven't changed. I'm still the same, dedicated Christian. I'm a righteous, on-fire believer." Jesus says they declared of themselves,

"I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" (3:17).

To me, this congregation represents the capitalistic frenzy of the modern American church. Our nation is a capitalistic society, meaning simply, "ever-increasing growth." And the business world has a motto: "Grow or die." Everything always has to be bigger. So you have to possess the drive to make things the biggest and the best.

That's fine for businesses. But this mentality has infiltrated the church. America is witnessing a "capitalistic Christianity." The goal is no longer spiritual growth, but expansion in numbers, property, finances. And ministers are caught up in the frenzy.

Jesus' judgment of the Laodiceans applies to many churches today: "You don't realize what has happened to you. Your blindness has caused you to grow lukewarm. And you don't even see it. You still think you're hot for Me."

In Ephesus, the church's sin was a loss of intimacy with Jesus. In Thyatira, it was a loss of discernment, and flirtation with spiritual fornication. Now, in Laodicea, we see the worst sin of all: a loss of all need for Christ.

It all ends up in nakedness. Jesus charged the Laodiceans with their naked condition: "*The shame of thy nakedness (does) not appear*" (3:18). The Greek word for naked here means "stripped of resources." You see, God reserves His resources for those who are reliant on Him, who depend on Him in their need. What are His resources? They're true spiritual riches: His strength, His miracle-working power, His divine guidance, His manifest presence. Christ was warning this self-reliant church: "I've stripped you of all My resources. But you don't think you need them. You're absolutely impoverished, but you don't recognize your condition."

Picture a congregation that sits comfortably through a one-hour

worship service. These Christians hear a short sermon on how to cope with life's stresses. Then they're quickly out the door. They don't sense any need to be broken or contrite before Jesus. They don't feel the need to be stirred or convicted by a piercing message. There's no cry of, "Lord, melt me, break me. You alone can fulfill my hunger."

Where is the zeal they had before? These believers were once eager to get to church, to pore over God's Word, to lay their hearts bare before the Spirit's searchlight. But now they think they've outgrown all that. So they've restricted their Christianity to Sunday mornings. Yet it's a religion of lukewarmness.

Jesus so loved this Laodicean pastor and his congregation, He let them know He was bringing drastic measures. He told them He would create a need in them for His resources: "*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent*" (3:19). His loving hand was coming to chasten them. And He would do it by creating a need in them to call on His power and help.

Beloved, Christ is speaking to us with the same words today. He's telling us, just as he told the Laodiceans: "This is all about supping with me. It's about answering the door when I knock. And I'm calling out to you now, to come and commune. I have everything you need. And whatever quality time you spend with Me gives you purchasing power. That's how you obtain My resources. Your fellowship with Me gives you what you need to continue in ministry. It all has to come from our time together."

This is how Christ's church will maintain its testimony in these last days. Amen!

by David Wilkerson
February 16, 2004

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