

Series Revelation

This Message #9 Revelation 3:14-22

Today we will think about the seventh and last of the church fellowships in the first section of the book of Revelation. From our study of chapters 2 and 3, I'm sure you are now aware of the concern Jesus had for the spiritual health of the 1st Century fellowships in Asia Minor.

The reality is that Jesus has always been concerned about the spiritual health of every group of people in our world who have claimed to be His followers. In almost all respects, fellowships today are not different than those in the 1st Century, and every fellowship needs to carefully consider its spiritual condition.

In His evaluation of the church fellowships, Jesus highlighted the activities with which He was pleased, but, by and large, His purpose was to exhort each fellowship to improve in godly behavior. His concluding remark in each message was "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says." Jesus' concern was for the entire fellowship, but, in the same way that a chain is made up of many individual links, a church fellowship is made up of individual members. Therefore, individual believers must pay attention to the truth which is revealed by the Holy Spirit, and they must be doers of the truth, not just hearers.

In each letter, Jesus called those believers who obeyed the truth in spite of opposing circumstances as "overcomers." The overcomer is characterized by perseverance even though the economic, societal, and religious systems of the world run counter to God-honoring ways. The overcomer is also characterized by unswerving loyalty and faithfulness to Jesus, even if such faithfulness leads to death. The overcomer thus meets the standard of behavior which is pleasing to both Jesus and the Father.

Let me review some of the lessons we learned during the past six weeks. I'm sure you will recognize that the 1st Century problems exist today in America, and, from what I have observed, exist all over the globe.

The church at Ephesus represents fellowships which practice a cold orthodoxy. The church in Ephesus maintained its doctrinal stance and protected itself against false teaching, but it had lost its love for God — lost the ardor and devotion to Christ which it had when its members first placed their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives.

The church at Smyrna represents fellowships which persevere through intense spiritual pressures. The believers in Smyrna lived in very antagonistic circumstances, in which they were afflicted, slandered, and deprived of material possessions because of their faith. They were admonished to not be afraid and to continue to be faithful even to the point of death. In our modern age, when the pressures and persecution against the followers of Jesus all over the world is increasing, Christian fellowships need to pattern their behavior after the church in Smyrna.

The churches at Pergamum and Thyatira are examples of fellowships which have compromised their doctrinal beliefs in order to fit into the thought and behavior patterns of the society around them. These fellowships tolerate incorrect Bible teaching and this is often the first step of believers toward complete rejection of their faith. When teaching deviates from Biblical truth, there is moral compromise on the part of church members, and the group becomes a tool of Satan rather than a testimony for God.

The church at Sardis is typical of fellowships which do not listen to and depend on the resources provided by the Holy Spirit. When this happens, a congregation becomes spiritually dead. It is unable to serve Jesus because it has no spiritual strength or life. Church fellowships which are like the one in Sardis can appear successful and have a good reputation from a human standpoint, but from Jesus' standpoint, are worthless.

The church at Philadelphia was commended by Jesus for keeping His word and not denying His name, and for serving faithfully with the little strength it had. It is the model that all Christian churches should follow. There are, fortunately, examples of this kind of church fellowship in the world, and these are the fellowships through which Jesus works to expand the kingdom of God.

I hope you recognize that these messages of Jesus to the 1st Century churches in Asia Minor are still relevant to contemporary fellowships today. The first vision seen by the Apostle John was of Jesus standing in the midst of seven lampstands, which represented the churches. Jesus is still standing among His people today, and He is intimately aware of the deficiencies and strengths of each group.

Today's message concerns the church at Laodicea. It thought of itself as self-sufficient, without need of anything. This is a terrible condition for believers to imagine. Actually, it is a form of self-delusion, as the reading will indicate.

Read Revelation 3:14-22

After reading the description of this church fellowship, we might doubt whether it was a true church. However, Jesus' love for this fellowship was the same as His love for the fellowship in the city of Philadelphia, over which Jesus pronounced no faults. Verse 19 states that Jesus "rebukes" and "disciplines" all those He loves, and this includes those who are pleasing to Him and those who are not.

The principle of this was taught by Jesus in the Gospel of John. He said, "The Father cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (*John 15:2*). That is such a significant statement. It applies to every believer. For those who please Him, discipline is a purifying process, and for those who are disobedient and drifting away from the truth, discipline is a wake up call to repent and get their spiritual lives back on track.

The writer to the Hebrews clarified this principle. He wrote "God disciplines us (believers) for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (*Hebrews 12:10*). Hardship, persecution, poor health, and pain — for believers these are problems that can have a beneficial purpose. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also wrote, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (*Hebrews 12:11*). Jesus wants all His followers to be loyal and faithful to Him, and to be serious about the spiritual quality of their lifestyles, and that is why He "rebukes and disciplines."

Let me give you a background picture of the city of Laodicea. It was located at a junction of main trade routes, and became a center for banking and commerce. The merchants of the city were wealthy.

One of the city's main industries was the manufacture of a special dark cloth from wool which was the envy of garment manufacturers everywhere. Laodicea was also known as a center for science and medicine. The school of medicine there was famous for the development of compounds for the healing of various diseases, including eye diseases, and for facial and beauty ointments.

The main limitation of the city was its lack of an adequate water supply. Water had to be obtained from springs which were several miles outside the city. North of the city there were lime-laden poor tasting hot springs. This water cooled to lukewarm as it flowed through an aqueduct into the city. There was a source of more refreshing cool water from the south, but this water became warm as it flowed into the city.

Jesus referred to this situation when He gave His assessment of the spiritual condition of the Laodicean church: "I know that you are neither cold or hot. I wish that you were either one or the other." Some commentators interpret this verse to mean that Jesus wanted the believers to be either passionate about their faith or completely "cold" and hostile to the Gospel. That is not the best way to understand the analogy. I'm sure that Jesus did not want people to be spiritual cold.

The words "hot" and "cold" refer to satisfaction and enjoyment. There is, for example, more satisfaction with hot tea and a cold drink than with water which was always lukewarm and "blah" in taste. Jesus wanted the believers to know that they were neither pleasing to God nor able to provide spiritual help to non-believers. The members of the church were complacent and indifferent about their faith. There was nothing satisfying about it. Therefore Jesus said, "I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Metaphorically speaking, the believers were an unsatisfying, bad tasting mouthful for God, just like the water which the people of Laodicea had to drink.

In contrast to the believers, Jesus identified Himself as the "Amen," a word which, in Scripture, is associated with "truth" and "authenticity." In His teaching Jesus frequently introduced particularly important truths by saying, "Verily, verily, I say to you," or, in some translations, "Truly, truly, I say to you." Those expressions were a form of the "amen." In a very broad sense, Jesus is the truth, the affirmation, of everything that God promised to fallen humanity.

The word "Amen" is closely linked to the next phrase, "the faithful and true witness." Jesus proved His faithfulness through obedience to the Father, even though it involved suffering and death. His death and resurrection was proof of the truth of Who He was.

Jesus also introduced Himself as “the ruler of God’s creation.” The word “ruler” also means “source” and “origin.” Thus, Jesus is the One who has absolute power over the world because He is the source and originator of all creation. He is the “Amen.”

The spiritual problem of the believers in Laodicea is given in verse 17. They were materially rich, and smug enough in their thinking to assume that they did not need anything. The implication is that the congregation had acquired its wealth and success through its own efforts. Its spiritual complacency was accompanied by spiritual pride. The Laodicean church had fallen into the trap of thinking that material prosperity was an indication of spiritual blessing, a kind of reward from God⁶.

The actual spiritual condition of the believers was that they were “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.” The pride of the believers had made them “blind” to and ignorant of the truth of who they were in the eyes of God. Generally speaking, the believers were not a happy group. Words such as “wretched” and “pitiful” indicate that they were not satisfied with their lives. They were neither in tune with God nor integrated into their surrounding society. Nominal Christians, like those spiritually complacent believers in Laodicea, are usually ambivalent and unhappy about their circumstances.

In verse 18 Jesus outlined the steps necessary for the church members to get back to the basics of their faith. He counseled them to “buy” gold, clothes, and eye-salve so that they would no longer be “poor,” “naked,” and “blind.” Jesus was using objects with which the citizens of Laodicea were familiar — the gold used in trade and commerce, the special cloth manufactured in the city, and the eye-salve used to treat diseases.

Jesus was using metaphorical language — after all, no person can actually “buy” spiritual blessings from Jesus. Spiritual blessings are made available only through the grace of God given in response to faith. This is not to say that there isn’t a cost to being a follower of Jesus. There is. Obedience and faithfulness and God-like counter-cultural behavior can bring on persecution and slander and even death. The point of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God while He was on earth is that believers must live to please God if they are to secure the true riches of heaven.

The members of the church needed to concentrate on spiritual and not just material rewards. The gold that Jesus provides is “gold refined in the fire,” a reference to faith which is tested and proven genuine by difficulties and suffering.

The best way to explain this is to compare the situation of Laodicea with that of Smyrna. The church in Smyrna was a persecuted church. It was a very poor church in regard to material resources, yet Jesus said that it was spiritually rich. In contrast, Laodicea had an abundance of wealth, but, spiritually speaking, it was poverty-stricken. Given their experiences, the believers in Smyrna possessed an abundance of “refined gold.” They had been through the fires of affliction, and, as a result, their faith was pure and strong. In contrast, the Laodicean believers had not been living out their faith, and hence their heavenly bank account was empty.

Concerning their appearance, the believers in Laodicea probably clothed themselves in name brand suits and dresses, [*the Armanis and Diors of their time*] but they were “shamefully naked” in the eyes of God. “Shameful nakedness” represented “disgrace.” In both the Old and New Testaments “nakedness” of character meant a person was liable to judgment. The church in Laodicea needed desperately to repent and be clothed with “white clothes.” Throughout this book, white clothing symbolizes righteousness and God’s glory.

The third step was for them to apply Jesus’ salve to their eyes. They needed to experience the spiritual healing that only Jesus could provide. Otherwise, they would continue in their blindness. The Laodicean believers needed to rethink their attitudes and behaviors and reorient themselves to the ways of faith and obedience to Jesus. They needed to depend on Him rather than on their wealth.

Verses 19 and 20 are an invitation to the members of the church. The congregation was on the verge of judgment, but all would not be lost if some of the members would make the changes demanded by Jesus. They would have to be “earnest” about their repentance. They would have to replace their “lukewarm” spirituality with a “zealous” and “sincere” form of obedience to Jesus because the only remedy for lukewarmness and complacency in the Christian life is to allow Jesus to rule within.

Jesus described Himself as standing at the door of the church, knocking and announcing Himself in the hope that some repentant members of the Laodicean congregation would let Him inside. For those who were willing to open the door, Jesus made a promise: “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.” In the customs of the 1st Century, a shared meal symbolized fellowship. It was during mealtimes that people could bond, and could clarify and reinforce their social and spiritual values. Obviously, it was up to the believers to make the first move, to want Jesus to come inside and to open the door to Him.

During His years on earth, Jesus shared numerous meals with many unlikely people — common workmen, fishermen, publicans, tax collectors, prostitutes. He was accused by the religious leaders of being a “friend” of sinners (*Matthew 11:16-19*), and they were correct! He was. Jesus was eager to associate with everyone who heard His voice, opened the door into their lives, and welcomed Him to come in. Verse 20 is a picture of the fellowship that faithful believers can have with Jesus in this life. His presence will replace the “wretchedness” that is experienced by “out-of-fellowship” believers.

Another promise is in verse 21. “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne.” This promise will be fulfilled when Jesus returns to earth at the end of the age and sets up His throne from which He will rule over the nations. The only other verse with which to cross-reference this promise is in the Gospel of Matthew. “Jesus said to the Twelve Disciples, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel’” (*Matthew 19:28*).

There is a comparison in verse 21 which helps us to understand what it means to be an overcomer. “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.” During His time on earth Jesus endured the powers of evil which were directed toward Him. He lived a righteous life, then suffered unjustly and died in order to defeat those powers and satisfy the holy demands of His heavenly Father. He was in the grave for three days. Because of His obedience, he was given the name which is above every name and He now sits alongside the Father in heaven.

Jesus is thus the model for all those who are spiritual overcomers. Overcomers are those who faced temptations, persecutions, suffering, and yet remain faithful even unto death. Such victorious believers are promised a share in the honor of Jesus' exalted position.

Within the fellowship at Laodicea there was much that was literally obnoxious to God, yet Jesus declared His love for the believers there, as wayward and self-centered and worldly as they were. And He extended His personal invitation to them to repent and return to fellowship with Himself. Jesus extends this same invitation to all His followers who today live as Laodiceans. The message to the church at Laodicea and to us concludes with that familiar refrain, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

⁶ There are a number of modern day popular media preachers who also link material prosperity with spiritual blessing.