

**THE CHURCH THE LORD JESUS IS BUILDING**

Matthew 16:13-23; Revelation 2 and 3

**Intro:** As most of you know, I have just spent eight Sunday mornings dealing with our Lord's letters to the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia. There have been eight messages because the first one was introductory to the whole series. I am extending that series through this morning because I want to take those seven letters to point out how they help us to understand what the intends for His church to be throughout its history here on earth. We can be sure that what pleased the Lord about the church in the first century, still pleases Him. Likewise, we can be sure that what displeased the Lord about the church in the first century, still displeases Him. And since we know that we as Christians are to "prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God," that is, we are to live to please the Lord, such a study should be of great interest to us.

We all learned, or should have learned soon after we were saved, that our primary objective in life is to please the Lord. And that is what we are seeking to do. That is one reason we read and study our Bibles. We know that it is in the Bible that we learn what pleases the Lord, and what displeases Him. But I don't think that we as believers, generally, have taken that same objective into the church. We somehow have come to think that the Bible governs our lives individually, but we haven't carried that same idea into the life of the church. And so I want to tie together what the Lord Jesus said about the church the first time we find it mentioned in the NT, with what we see in his letters to the seven churches at the end of the NT. Time will not allow me to go into this subject in detail, but I hope I will be able to say enough so that you can continue the study later "on your own." If we would be honest in studying this subject from the New Testament, we would not be doing many of the things that are going on in churches today, and, on the other hand, we would be doing things that we are not doing, or not giving the attention to things that were important in the early church.

Now it was with this in mind that I asked Mr. Matthews to read for us that key passage having to do with the church found in Matthew 16. And most of you probably know that this is the first place that the word "church" appears in the NT. My computer tells me that "church" or "churches," the words, are found 114 times in the NT. And in many passages where the words may not be used, the emphasis is upon what the

Lord wants His church to be, and what He wants us to be doing.

What does Matthew 16 tell us about the church? There are several things of importance here, but the one thing I want you to notice that He said is found in verse 18. Notice that the Lord said, "I will build my church." He did not tell His disciples, "You will build my church," but "I will build my church." So building the church was not primarily the work of Peter, or of Paul, or of John. They were human instruments that the Lord used, *but He was the Builder.*

*And, since the Lord is an ever-living, a never-dying Lord, He is still in charge of the building of His Church.* And notice that He called it, "My church." He is not only the Builder, but He is the Foundation. See 1 Cor. 3:9-11 where the Apostle Paul spoke of the work of the Lord in these words:

9 For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building.

10 According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.

11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:9-11).

There are some who say that Peter was the first leader of the church, but the NT contains more epistles written by Paul than by Peter. But neither of these men would have said that they were the ones who determined what the church should be. Nor would the Apostle John have made that claim. They were men God used to establish the church, and to help and to teach believers in many places what the church should be, but they knew it was the Lord Who was building His own church. And the Lord has not relinquished that authority from those days to our day. He continues to be the One Who is building His church.

When we think of these letters from our Lord in this light, we are going to be surprised at what we find. The Lord did not tell them what kind of buildings they should have. He did not tell them how many times to meet each week. He did not tell them how many leaders they should have, or what their attendance goals should be. He did not speak to them about the equipment that they should have. He did not speak of the degrees of the elders and deacons. Well, let's see what He did emphasize.

We will start with:

## **I. THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS (Rev. 2:1-7).**

The Lord commended them for their hard work, and for their perseverance, for their ability to know who was an apostle, and who was not. But with all of the good things that were going on in Ephesus, the Lord saw that something very important was missing that had been there before. We find His words that I am thinking about in verse 4 of Rev. 2:

4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

Now before we seek to understand our Lord's words in this verse, notice from the following verse that this was such a great lack that it threatened the testimony of the church in Ephesus. In other words, this was a quality that was essential to the life of the church. Oh, it wouldn't have stopped their meetings, but the church would have been without the power that it had manifested in its earlier days.

What had declined which is absolutely essential if a church is to be a mighty instrument in its community? What makes a church a mighty instrument in God's hands? First and foremost (and perhaps this is why it comes up in the first letter of the seven), *it is a church's love for the Lord Jesus*. And a church's love for the Lord is made up of the love that the people have for the Lord. Perhaps the Lord had noticed that they didn't talk about Him the way they did in their earlier days. And I see in this also that they did not talk to Him like this did in past days. Prayer was not a real priority with the people. They were so busy serving the Lord that they really did not have time for the Lord.

In studying this again I went back and looked at the way the Apostle Paul began his epistle to the Ephesians. Turn with me to that epistle for just a moment, and notice how often Paul spoke of Christ. (Read.)

How often do we think about Him? How much do we talk about Him in our homes, and even in personal conversation here at church? And what place does prayer have in our personal lives, in our family lives, in our church life? Loving the Lord is the greatest commandment of all. If we fail there, we are going to fail everywhere else. We like it when people go away saying that you really hear Bible teaching when you go to Trinity. And it is good when people join with us in singing the great hymns of the church. But do we stand out as a people who really love the

Lord? I hope we do. But I hope that this is not something we had, but have lost. We may not have noticed it, *but the Lord always does! Let us all check ourselves on this.*

But let us go on to the second letter.

## **II. THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA (Rev. 2:8-11).**

This church was poor financially, but rich spiritually, and it had been infiltrated by people who said they were Jews, that is, they claimed to be the people of God, and the true believers in Smyrna knew that they weren't the Lord's people. The devil was really at work in the church at Smyrna. Why? Apparently because they would not compromise with the Gospel.

I heard this week about a prominent denomination that is sending money to aid the Moslem religion. Catholics and even some Jews are doing the same. When confronted with this, one of their men responded by saying, "Why not? They believe in God just like we do." You would never have heard that in the church at Smyrna. They insisted that to be a Christian you had to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in Him alone! The believers at Smyrna showed that the Lord had written the truth on their hearts, and they refused to water down or to compromise in any way with the Gospel. And they were paying a price for their stand.

Do you remember the words of Isaac Watts' hymn where he said,  
Am I a soldier of the Cross, A foll'wer of the Lamb,  
And shall I fear to own His cause, Or blush to speak His Name?  
The church that the Lord Jesus builds is not ashamed of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But let us move on, and I will take the next two churches together:

## **III. THE CHURCHES AT PERGAMOS AND THYATIRA (Rev. 2: 12-29).**

These two churches had a common problem. They both had false teachers. And they were threatened with drastic action from the Lord Jesus Himself because the church He is building has no room for any compromise with the truth. The Nicolaitanes were in Pergamos, and Jezebel was in Thyatira. The church that the Lord Jesus is building is

doctrinally pure! For us this means standing by the teaching of the Word of God. The church that the Lord Jesus is building has no place for humanistic psychology or philosophy. Such a church recognizes the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men. No doctrinal statement, nor any creed of the church, will ever be accepted on a par with the Word of God. The church that the Lord Jesus builds will be quick to recognize teaching that is not in accord with the Word of God, and will raise up a standard against it. There is a great movement today to bring all religions together. Those who stand for the Word of God will inevitably face those who oppose such a stand. And often the false teachers are in the church. But there can be no compromise with the teaching of Scripture. The church that fails here, will be a church that will be abandoned by the Lord, and those involved will face judgment directly from the Lord.

We need to check ourselves on this lest there be any softening with regard to any part of Scripture. Great blessing is promised to those churches who remain faithful to the Word of God. But those who do not, will have to face judgment from the Lord of the church. Evangelicals and Catholics together sounds good to a lot of people, but such an alliance cannot be of God because it involves compromise on the part of those who are supposed to believe the truth of the Word of God.

What can be learn from the church at Sardis?

#### **IV. THE CHURCH AT SARDIS (Rev. 3:1-6).**

The church at Sardis, like most of the churches to whom the Lord wrote, had a good name in the past. But they were living on their past reputation. Actually the Lord said that they were “dead.” Actually they were wearing “defiled ... garments.” This may have been a problem in the other churches as well, but it is specifically pointed out in the Lord’s letter to Sardis. What do defiled garments mean? It means that there was no longer an emphasis on personal holiness. The people had gotten careless about worldliness. They claimed to know the Lord and to love the Lord, but their lives contradicted what they claimed. When we begin to live on past blessings, it is a sign of spiritual declension. There are churches all over our country that now deny the faith which was once preached from their pulpits. But the change did not take place overnight. It begins in subtle ways as Christians begin to get careless about personal Bible reading and the application of what they read to their daily living. Prayer is

neglected. And the slide which has begun gets wider and stronger. The church that the Lord Jesus builds is going to be a holy church. Sin is not only avoided, but it is hated. Believers want to be like the Lord Jesus, and they look forward to that certain day ahead when it will no longer be possible for any of us to sin. The church that the Lord Jesus builds will love righteousness and hate iniquity.

Are their things which we once avoided that don't seem so bad anymore? If so, we need to be alarmed, and to seek the Lord's forgiveness and cleansing. Those of us who are parents and grandparents need to be very careful because our lives can offend rule out what we say. Holiness is never popular with the people of the world, but we as Christians are not called to be popular; we are called to be holy. If you are not attracted by a holy life, you probably need to examine your relationship with the Lord.

Now on to Philadelphia.

## **V. THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA (Rev. 3:7-13).**

This is one of the more encouraging churches when we remember that it is the Lord Who is building His church.

In the first place, we must remember that the Lord is the One Who opens doors for us, but He is also the One Who closes doors. No one can close what the Lord opens, nor can anyone open what the Lord has closed. So we need to pay close attention to what the Lord is doing, and how He is leading us. This keeps us looking to Him, depending upon Him, and realizing how responsible we are to Him. We don't open doors and then ask the Lord's blessing to be upon us. He opens doors, and with the open doors comes blessing.

In Philadelphia the Jews were a particular problem. They claimed that because they were Jews, they were the people of God. They didn't need salvation; they had it because they were Jewish by birth. (At least this was their claim.) But the Lord promised that a mighty work would be done because the Lord was going to open their hearts to the Gospel, and many would be saved. How wonderful would be the blessings if we would only learn to trust the Lord to open doors. The Lord's work must be done in the Lord's way, not our way, if we are to see His blessing.

Finally, we come to:

## **VI. THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA (Rev. 3:14-22).**

The Laodicean church was characterized by self-sufficiency, self-satisfaction, which are nothing but pride under a different name. Where the Lord is building His church, you will find humble spirits. You will find believers who are not satisfied with themselves and the progress they have made in living for the Lord. The Laodicean believers were an indifferent lot. They didn't feel that they had any needs. But at the same time they were a miserable lot. By their very behavior they would never have made people desire what they had, because they clearly had nothing. Self-sufficient people are self-deceived. Nobody can possibly be self-sufficient. God holds our lives and all of the circumstances of our lives in His hands. So if the Lord recognized the Laodicean church as His church, and the Laodicean church members as His people, we can be sure that the Lord was going to work to make them totally different from what they were when the Lord wrote this letter.

**Concl:** What we need to do, is to get our eyes off of ourselves and what we have done, or are doing, and get our eyes on the Lord and what He is doing. And if He is pleased to work in us, and then through us, our attitude will be that we are unworthy of the least of His blessings, and marvel at His patience with us, and at the ways in which He seems to be using us.

Let's remember our Lord's words in Matt. 16:18, "I will build my church." And then from Revelation 2 and 3, as well as all of Scripture, let us learn from God's Word what it is that He anticipates as the finished product, and how our present circumstances fit in with what He is doing in our lives to make His Church what He is determined that it shall be. That is where Romans 8:28 which we had in SS this morning will serve to encourage us, and then we will watch to see how the Lord will do with us what we could never possibly do for ourselves.