

When the church becomes like the city

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 December 2024

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 0 0] Well, this morning we're going to think about what happens when the church looks like the city or looks like the world. Just by way of introducing this idea, cities we know have an identity and a culture that is unique to each one, and it's reflected in lots of different ways. You go to a new city, you'll identify particular architectural features, industries on which the city is built, there'll be a particular ethic and a set of attitudes for locals if you have a chance to get to know them. There are things that are clearly celebrated and spoken about within different cities. So Edinburgh, as an example, I imagine for many of us we think about Edinburgh, we think about education and ideas. That's been a big part of Edinburgh's history. We think about politics and power. This is a place of government and influence. We recognize almost immediately it's a place with a deep history and a sense of culture. Every city has its unique identity.

But our question, the question of Jesus, is what happens when a local church takes on the values of a particular city? Because as we'll see, that's going to form the basis of two warnings that Jesus brings.

So here we are in Advent season, thinking about the first coming of Jesus, thinking about the return of Jesus. One aspect that we perhaps often overlook is the reality that Jesus comes both to save, but also to judge. It's really interesting that probably the last significant Old Testament promise about the coming of Messiah, the book of Malachi, speaks about the Lord coming to His temple.

People instinctively would think that's a wonderful prospect. But Malachi delivers a shock to the system. There's a warning about refining and of heat and of a scrubbing with launderer soap that is almost unbearable, save for a small remnant. And so almost the last note of anticipation of the coming of Messiah is that it brings salvation for some, but judgment for others. And response is all important. And then we think about Jesus' own ministry. Think about the number of times He speaks messages of war, judgment against the religious leaders. Or recognize Matthew chapter 10, Jesus sends the disciples out on their mission and He warns them, there are whole cities who are going to want nothing to do with you because you represent the message of Jesus. He says that in the mission of God there will be judgment and division that cuts to the very heart of families. And then we heard one of the many kingdom parables that Jesus tells recorded by Matthew. There is that wedding banquet, wonderful provision, great and open invitation. But some refuse, some to try and get in their own way. And there is judgment, there is exclusion. So it's an important but overlooked note. We come to Revelation chapter 3, we're listening to a letter written by the risen, one day returning, Lord Jesus. And it's two warnings. There is a warning to this city, church in the city called Sardis, because they're a worldly church and they're compromising their faith. But there's also a warning to the church in Laodicea, because they've grown very wealthy.

And at the same time, they're complacent in their faith. And remember that these letters are always letters to the churches. So it's an invitation to us all to hear the message, to heed the warning, a chance to reflect, to consider how we stand before Jesus today. Are we ready for His return?

[4 : 14] Are we remaining faithful that we might receive that promised eternal reward? So let's look first at this letter to Sardis, to a worldly compromising church. These two letters are fascinating in the number of parallels that Jesus draws between the church and the city, to highlight for us the problem that the Christians are absorbing the values of the city. So the city of Sardis, here's some things that we need to know about Sardis. Sardis was once a very powerful and wealthy city in the first century, but that hadn't been the case for quite a few hundred years. Now it was regarded as something of a faded glory. The key feature, there's the ruins up there, there was an Acropolis fortress. So there was this great sheer cliff, fifteen hundred feet, and they built this Acropolis on the top, and they felt they were really safe because they had this fortress. If ever there was enemies that came, the citizens would run, hide in the fortress. They thought nobody could scale the wall, but somebody did. 214 BC, at night, a group of enemy soldiers scaled that 1,500 foot cliff. They opened the city gates, soldiers piled in, the city was destroyed, and it never really recovered. Another feature that we need to know about this city, and it was a source of shame for them in the present. They'd started building a big temple to the goddess Artemis, but they ran out of resources to finish it. So it stood there, half finished, on the outskirts of the city. Okay, so hold those in your mind. Now let's turn to the Bible, and let's think about what

Jesus says about himself to this church. Remember, all of his introductions serve a purpose. Here in verse 1, these are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. The seven spirits, that symbolism of seven perfection, I hold the perfect spirit, and I am in control over the angels who's in charge of the church. Jesus' point, I am in control. And this is a good promise in the sense of Jesus being able to give renewal to this church that has actually almost died spiritually. So if they hear and respond, there is hope, because Jesus is in control. But what happens next is that Jesus identifies their problems, three problems that are very much tied to the story of the city. First, that idea of faded glory. Look at verse 1, I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive, but you're dead.

Here is a church that's living on its past reputation. Well, back in the day, there was every evidence that they were alive for Christ. Their life was dedicated to him, but in the present, it's as if they're dead.

They've lost any power to witness. They are no different to the world around them. They have fallen asleep. Wake up, he says in verse 2. Strengthen what remains and is about to die.

So just like the watchmen at Sardis who fell asleep and let the enemies in, the church is doing the same and disaster. And there is this urgent need, Jesus says, for them to deal with this invasion of sin that has come into the church. There is this great need to strengthen what little remains.

[8 : 13] Most have turned away from Jesus, but not all. And that again, there is this hope that with the power of the Spirit as Jesus would send the Spirit, this remnant can turn the church around.

And then there's this other reality that they need to finish what they have started. End of verse 2, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. It's as if Jesus is saying to them, look at that useless temple over there, it's like your deeds right now. Because their heart is not right. They are half-hearted. And so their deeds are useless.

Faith is a faith that perseveres. Faith is a faith that is seen in our work, in our worship, in our witness. And that's not the case here, because they're compromising to get ahead.

And so there is this call. Verse 3, remember what you've received and heard. Hold it fast and repent. There is this urgency again. You need to turn back to Jesus and the gospel.

You need to get back to that place where Jesus is first priority. You need to remember what faith looks like. It holds on to truth, and it works itself out in practices of love. So the story of Sardis, the letter to Sardis stands as a warning to churches and to Christians of the problem of a church becoming like the city, becoming like the world.

[9 : 48] So Jesus would want us to have a counterculture, to be different to society around us, because he has called us to be citizens of heaven. And so that inevitably must affect what we think is most important. So as much as we might live surrounded as Sardis did with people who are living for power and success and education, that that's everything, we need to resist to make sure that our loyalty belongs to God. And so there is that call to wakefulness for us. Is my focus and my hope fixed on Jesus, or has it shifted? Are my values, the way I go about family life and work life and friendships, are those values based on what Jesus teaches or what I receive from my peers or from my culture? Is my faith being squeezed into the wrong mold? And it's also, I think, a warning about reputation over reality. It's true, isn't it, that every relationship needs ongoing work.

It would not go well, I suspect, if we decided to say, do you know what, I gave Christmas presents last year to my friends and my family? I'm not going to bother this year. I've shown my love in the past.

It doesn't really matter in the present. That's kind of the attitude going on in Sardis, and we need to be careful that that's not our attitude towards Jesus in our present. So we need to be asking ourselves, what's the state of God today? What's the state of my heart today? Not last month, not last year.

Am I walking with God today? Do I love God's Word and God's people more today than I did in the past? Am I growing? Is my commitment to deal with sin still there? And if not, we too need to wake up and repent and recover to heed that alarm, because it can be all too easy to sleep through an alarm.

But Jesus wants to sound that spiritual wake-up call so we don't miss it, because His judgment messages can be redemptive messages, ultimately for our good, if we hear and respond and believe in light of His coming. Well, moving from the problems, let's think about the promise made to the church in Sardis.

[12 : 40] One other thing about the city, it was the center of the wool industry, a key industry. It was clothing for them, and again, Jesus draws on that, as well as a Roman background, as He says in verse 4, Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with Me dressed in white, for they are worthy. So imagine for a moment a nice white robe. You can think of a wedding dress if you want, and picture the dark stain right on the front. Jesus says compromise makes a person unclean, trying to be part Christian and part worldly. For whatever reason, maybe that's fear, maybe that's comfort. It serves to spoil and to soil. But there are those who haven't done that.

And there's this promise in verse 4 and verse 5 of a people who will walk in white. And maybe you think, what does it mean to walk in white? That's an unusual phrase. And that's what we need to know about a Roman triumph. So a Roman triumph would be thrown whenever a Caesar did anything particularly impressive, or perhaps a general won a great military victory, and a city would throw a triumph. And so this great leader would be led in procession by folks wearing white togas. It was a symbol of victory, honor, and glory. And Jesus uses this picture to say that His second coming will be like a victory procession. When He returns, His salvation will be fully and finally complete. His kingdom will be fully established and the faithful. They will share in that victory and that honor, joining the procession where Jesus gets the glory. And what Jesus is saying, for those who avoid compromise, for those who keep our faith in Jesus, end time eternal glory is coming.

And related to that is the second part of the promise. In verse 5, the one who is victorious will be dressed in white, I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and His angels. So again, in Jewish thought and in Roman thought, you know, if your name was blotted out, if it was inked over from some public record, it was a sign of judgment, of exclusion, and of shame. But Jesus promises to the faithful, those who keep faith in Jesus, those who keep faith in Jesus, I will never blot out your name. In fact, I will publicly acknowledge you before my Father and before the angels on judgment day.

So the reality is that when Jesus comes back, there will be a day of judgment. And what Jesus says by way of good news is that when our faith is in the Lord Jesus, we have this certain confidence that we will not be condemned, but rather we will be welcomed, we will be honored, we will be acknowledged. That Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters to publicly acknowledge us. It's a reminder that the most important thing in the world is what does God think of us? What will Jesus say of us? That we would live for well done, good, and faithful service. And so Jesus writes this word of warning to those who are looking for honor and status in their city and in their world, and they're compromising their faith. He says, come to me, come to me, return to me, that honor and glory you seek ultimately is found in what I offer.

I will give you a seat at my table. Eternal honor awaits. Don't compromise, but keep the faith. Well, what does he say then to the church in Laodicea? It's a remarkable letter, this one. It's a beautiful reminder of God's grace because Jesus will say to this church both, you make me sick, and here I am, I stand at the door and knock, welcome me in. And it's a reminder that there is no church, there is no Christian, there is no person who is beyond the hope of God's grace.

[17 : 40] So the city of Laodicea, what do we know about that? It was in a wonderful location. It was right in the center of these two great trade routes, one running north to south, one running east to west. It was very wealthy. It was very loyal to Rome, so it had great importance, had this big banking industry, so it was very successful and affluent. It was also a place where the Jewish leaders, we've seen this before, they were trying to do this kind of mix and match thing with their religion to compromise their beliefs in order to get ahead in the world. And the church is tempted and in danger and sometimes doing the very same. We'll worship Jesus, but we'll also worship the local gods of Rome. The one problem that this city had, beyond that spiritual problem, is they had no water supply. So they were utterly reliant on water being piped in from a nearby city, the city of Colossae, and we're going to see how Jesus draws on that. So what does Jesus have to say to the church? First of all, about himself. Verse 14, these are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. What's being emphasized here? Here is the voice of ultimate authority.

Here is the one voice to listen to. Here is the agent of creation. And indeed, he is the agent of new creation. And so he reminds this church, you may think that you're getting on and you're wealthy and powerful, but you need to recognize, I am the voice of authority. I'm the one in control.

My assessment ultimately is the one that matters. Now, how does Jesus assess their problem? And again, we're going to see some parallels with the city. First, and maybe most famously, he talks about their sickening deeds. I know your deeds. They are neither hot or cold. I wish you were one or the other. So because you're lukewarm, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. So this is to do with, this is an image drawn from the Laodicean water supply. So as it gets piped about 50 miles or so, from Colossae, gradually the water temperature was rising. Those pipes, they always struggled to keep them clean. So often the people in Laodicea, they're drinking horrible lukewarm water and they're having stomach problems. And Jesus uses that and says, listen, your half-hearted deeds are offensive to me.

Unlike the neighboring city of Hierapolis, which was like a spa town, it had these hot springs with healing properties in the water, Jesus says, your deeds have no healing properties. They're not doing anybody any good. Unlike the city of Colossae with that beautiful, pure, refreshing spring water, your deeds have no refreshing properties. They're benefiting no one.

Jesus sees and knows hearts and he says to them very clearly, your deeds, because of your heart, make me want to vomit. He goes on to talk about their self-reliance, the fact that they are complacent.

[20 : 58] And again, they've taken on the character of the city. Verse 17, you say, I'm rich, have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. Really interesting. In AD 60, this city also, we've seen a lot of earthquakes, this city was hit by an earthquake. And Rome sent word and said, listen, we heard you had a really bad earthquake. We'll send some resources and we'll help you fix up the city. And they said to the center, no thanks, we're fine by ourselves. We'll build back bigger. We don't need you. And they did. And so they're very self-reliant. And the church has come to see itself in the same way. We've got it made. We've achieved success. We've got wealth and status and luxury and security. They need to hear Jesus' verdict to recognize the heart problem. You do not realize you're wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. Christians must always have humble dependence.

It's a huge heart problem when a Christian says no to Jesus as Lord because we feel we can do it by ourselves. This is one of these churches that they don't have an external problem. We don't hear anything about persecution. The problem all lies within. So there's these sickening deeds, there's self-reliance, and also, to continue the image, they're shopping from the wrong supplier. Verse 18, I counsel you to buy from me. And then there's this list of things. So again, we've probably had this experience at some point in our lives, especially if we use online suppliers. You think, ah, here's the thing that I need. I can find it cheaper and quicker online. Eventually, you get the product. It turns out not to be exactly as described. The quality is not great. We think we've got the right product. We've got the wrong supplier. It's a disappointment. Jesus comes to this church and says, you're looking for wealth and glory and healing and contentment, but you're going to the wrong supplies, thinking you'll find them in the world rather than finding them with Jesus. And so he says, you need to change your buying habits. Come to me. Buy from me. And again, he draws on the reputation and the industry around the city. So Laodicea's wealth and reputation was built around three industries. First was banking.

Huge banking center. What does Jesus say to them? I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire. It's that basic point that Jesus makes so many times. Finances do not make you rich, ultimately, eternally, spiritually. His gold is the treasure in heaven that were Jesus as Lord.

They had a big clothing industry and place known for its fashion. I counsel you to buy from me white clothes to wear so that you can cover your shameful nakedness. He says to these Christians that have forgotten him, these fancy clothes you're wearing, they don't deal with your shame. They don't cover your disgrace. Looking good does not equal being good in God's sight. Jesus' clothing is different. By His grace clothes us with His perfect righteousness. In His goodness, He takes our shame on the cross that we might be clothed with His honor. A third industry was that of medical care, and especially they'd recently come up with a treatment for eye problems. And so Jesus says, I counsel you to buy from me salve to put on your eyes so that you can see. So they had all this worldly success. They were very wealthy, very influential. Jesus says, listen, that won't deal with your spiritual blindness. If you are not right with God, if you do not put yourselves right with God, you're in the dark. Jesus' healing deals with spiritual blindness. Jesus would come so that we might see the glory and the beauty of Jesus above all else. And so Jesus, again, sounds a very similar alarm with Sardis, that without faith, without enduring in truth and love, if we become complacent and live in the past, all the great achievements that we might have are nothing but an illusion in light of eternity. But here's the thing that's so remarkable about this letter, is that before we get to the promise, we also get an invitation. This is unique in these letters.

Verse 19 and 20, we see the remarkable patience and love of Jesus as He says to them, those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline, so be earnest and repent. So there's the first invitation that He gives to this church. And remember, Jesus has said, your deeds make me want to vomit. But He says, listen, I'm inviting you to receive loving discipline.

[26 : 10] Here is another example where the opposite of love, you know, the opposite of love, sometimes we often think the opposite of love is hate, but sometimes the opposite of love is indifference. He says, I don't care enough to deal with the mess that you're making of your life. But Jesus is not like that. Jesus sees the mess, sees what is going wrong, and He gives a clear warning. He gives rebuke. He identifies their problem, and He calls them to act. He brings His discipline. He will punish in order to correct error. And the question is, will they receive this? It's a hard invitation, but it's a merciful one.

What a gift to any of us. We find ourselves spiritually disobedient, spiritually deadened, spiritually defeated, to know that Jesus would love us enough to speak to us, to intervene, to draw us back, by His Word, through His people, by His Spirit.

But we humble ourselves to receive correction from Jesus. It's so easy to tune it out, to be convicted in a moment, but then to leave it, or to take offense. But our great need, like that in Laodicea, so often is to turn, and to be disciplined, and to repent. And then there's that second loving invitation. The second aspect is that they're invited to receive the offer of Jesus' friendship. Isn't that remarkable?

It's this church to which Jesus says, here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

In the ancient world, there was a saying, to share a meal is to share a life. Table fellowship was always very significant, significant in the ministry of Jesus. Significant here in this picture. Jesus comes to these complacent and cold Christians, whose deeds are making Him sick, and He says, here I am. I want you to invite me deeply into your heart and life. Don't be content. Don't be complacent with keeping me at arm's length. Invite me in to restored fellowship and blessing.

[28 : 41] And so they hear, and we hear, and the question is, will we open the door? Will we welcome Jesus to enjoy life with us? Because it's a reminder to us, isn't it, that Christ and all His benefits, all that we would ever need, every spiritual blessing is there for us in Jesus in the gospel. The pathway back to the joy of life with God is found in Jesus. And Jesus doesn't stay at a distance, but rather He comes and He knocks and He invites by His grace. And the question is, will we be content to keep Him out there, content with our wealth, our influence, our security, our comfort, or do we want more?

More of Jesus. More of His love. More of His joy. In which case we'll invite Him in and find His promise is true. Look at the promise that Jesus gives to this church. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on His throne. So He says to this church, listen, if you overcome the pull of the world, if you turn back to me, you'll share my throne. You'll share glory. You'll share honor.

Yourself victory. So you've got this picture of here is God. We'll come Revelation 4, God on the throne room of heaven. Here is God who sits on the throne, who rules in majesty. And here is the risen Jesus, who is now appointed to sit, to rule and reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. And He takes the throne and He has authority. And He says that believers who trust in Him, we get to share His victory, share His glory, share His honor. To understand this is actually what we were made for.

Adam and Eve, made to rule for God, to rule under God, to rule in relationship with God, to have joy in God. And there is this promise for all eternity. What we were made for is how we will live as the people of God. And Jesus invites Laodicea and He invites us to recognize this is true wealth.

Here is a wealth we never want to lose hold of. Here is a treasure that never gets old, that never devalues. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. So what happens when the church looks like the city? Jesus' letter reveals it's a dangerous temptation that we can all face.

[31 : 31] And He lays out really starkly the warnings that it will lead to a compromised faith. It will lead to complacency. It will lead to us chasing the same goals as the world, which are not the goals of the kingdom.

And it will lead us to operate as a church with the same values as the world, which are not always and often not the same as the values of Jesus our King. And so as Jesus reveals the danger, He calls the church to the total opposite. Choose to return to Me. Choose to live for Me. Choose to open your heart to Me, to recognize that fellowship and glory and honor, that's the thing. And that will change how we live.

As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, you are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. That's the city we are to represent and reflect. The city that bears the values of Jesus, that wants to love like Jesus. He wants the church, He wants His people to be known for truth and love, to be a positive influence on the city as we point people to Jesus. This Jesus who humbled Himself and bore shame so that we could know honor. This Jesus who died that we might live and live for all eternity.

This Jesus who rose again and will return to share His glory and honor and victory with His people. Let's let Him be the one we live for. Let's pray.

Let's pray.