

Hearing From God

by Robert B. Thompson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of hearing from God and seeking His guidance in all aspects of life, rather than relying on human wisdom and strength.

Scripture: Isaiah 30:21, Acts 5:19, Ephesians 4:11, Philippians 3:10, Revelation 3:20

Topics: "Hearing God", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

Robert B. Thompson preaches about the importance of hearing from God in the midst of man-centered busyness and church activities. He emphasizes the need for churches to focus on scriptural goals, such as making disciples and bringing believers to maturity in Christ, rather than just seeking numbers and growth. Thompson highlights the danger of being busy with religious activities but not abiding in the Spirit of God, using the examples of the churches in Laodicea and Sardis. He calls for a return to seeking God's will, listening to His voice, and aligning efforts with the hierarchy of goals set by God for His Kingdom.

Transcript

Some have said the seven churches of Asia represent seven periods of history. I wouldn't oppose this thought, but it seems to me that the Words of Christ to each of the seven churches apply to us today.

Laodicea, the one church about which Jesus said nothing good, is offered two of the greatest of the rewards: to dine with the Lord in our own personality; and to sit with the Lord on His throne. This church especially may be found in the last days.

I think the church at Laodicea is characterized by man-centeredness, and man-centeredness certainly is descriptive of our day. We are so busy running here and there, attempting to create our own heaven and earth.

Man-centered busyness is as true of Christian church work as it is of other enterprises. You would think, from hearing all the various Christian projects, plans, and seminars, that Christ is far away in Heaven, leaving it up to us to heal the world in the manner we see most appropriate.

To put it simply and plainly: we are not hearing from God. Christ has things He wants to say, and we are too busy "doing His work" to listen! In fact, we have become arrogant, not rendering to Jesus Christ the reverence due Him who is King of all kings and Lord of all Lords. We are thinking of Jesus as some kind of butler who will help us as we "eat our own food and provide our own clothes." "Just let us be called by

Your name so we have a noble identity."

All efficient systems have clearly defined goals. Modern church efforts have a clearly defined goal. It is to get as many people as possible to make a profession of Christ and join our denomination so they will go to Heaven when they die. This is not, of course, a scriptural goal. Because our goal is not scriptural our methods also are unscriptural. They proceed from the brain and talents of man rather than from the Holy Spirit.

This probably was the case with the church at Sardis. The church at Sardis had a reputation for being alive. Since Christian people are the ones who most likely would be the judges of the life of a church, I think we are safe in assuming that the assembling was growing rapidly in numbers. This is the criterion customarily applied by Christian people when evaluating the life of a church.

To all appearances the church at Sardis was active in every sort of Christian endeavor and was filled with enthusiastic members.

Christ warned: "You are dead"!

. . . you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Revelation 3:1)

If an assembling of Christians has a number of interesting programs in operation, such as missionary outreach, youth clubs, home fellowship groups, and the worship is contemporary and uplifting, and mime, drama, dancing, and pageantry provide opportunities for widespread participation, it is likely to grow in numbers.

Such a church might be alive or it might be dead, in the eyes of Christ. But how can we tell?

The above activities and growth may be true of a church that is spiritually alive or one that is spiritually dead. What makes the difference in the eyes of Christ?

The key to life and death is found in the manner in which Christ addresses the church:

. . . These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. (Revelation 3:1)

"Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."

The life of the church at Sardis was the life of the flesh. The activities simulated a church that was alive by the Spirit of God, but the Spirit of God was not present.

It appears that numerous Christian believers of our day cannot distinguish between the human religious activities and the activities produced by God's Spirit. We notice how readily the "prosperity" and metaphysical "faith" doctrines were received, although these teachings are unscriptural. The believers simply are unable to perceive what is of God and what is not. They are led astray by talented leaders.

Yes, the church at Sardis was active and growing in numbers. But it was not abiding in the Spirit of God. The believers were enjoying themselves but Christ was not being formed in them.

Only a remnant of this large church had the promise that their names would not be blotted from the Book of Life. What was the benefit of having such a crowd of people?

So it is true today. We have a considerable amount of activity taking place in Christian churches. We are measuring their success by the growing numbers of people in attendance. But in how many instances is this activity being sponsored by the Holy Spirit?

It is time for us to hear from God, because we may be leading multitudes of people astray with our emphasis on numbers as the criterion of success.

Perhaps numerous Christians would protest that "we must not judge the worth of a church by the numbers of people who attend," but this usually is idle talk. Whenever someone is inquiring about how a church is doing, they want to know how many people are in attendance.

But we might not be amiss in saying there often is a negative relationship between numbers of people in attendance and the godly quality of an assembling. This is to say, a great multitude of people in attendance may indicate the demands of discipleship are being compromised. Of course this is not necessarily true; but is it not often the case?

If our goal is to gather great numbers of people, are we going to preach that we cannot be a Christian unless we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus? Or are we going to conduct the service so new people will not be offended?

Ah, but once we get them in we can disciple them! This is to practice deception. We give them the impression that accepting Christ is a pleasure trip to Disneyland in the sky, and then at some point we are going to tell them they are to offer their body as a living sacrifice to God?

There is one church in Southeast Asia that I know of that will not accept a member in their assembly unless that person is ready and willing to die for the Gospel's sake. But we Americans are babies.

If a system defines its goal improperly it is in trouble all down the line. It cannot effectively design or implement quality control techniques. It cannot possibly determine the cost-effectiveness of its expenditures.

In any system the people in charge must define the goal or goals clearly. In most businesses the actual goal is to return a profit to the shareholders. A secondary goal might be to manufacture an excellent product. Then there are lesser goals in the system, such as getting doughnuts for the coffee break at the best price. But every such secondary goal must measure its effectiveness and efficiency in terms of the actual goal. Otherwise, the system will be forced to yield to its competitors.

Christian efforts are directed toward the unscriptural goal of gaining numbers of people. New converts are directed to go out and get more converts.

Sometimes, in the rush to "serve Christ" various social endeavors may be attempted. The idea is, if we assist people in some manner they will become Christians. However, human nature being what it is, the idea of bringing people to Christ by means of social assistance soon is eclipsed because of the tremendous effort that must be given if we are to improve the life of needy people. Feeding the hungry and clothing the naked of this world can be a problem of insurmountable proportions, and the task of making people disciples of Christ falls by the way.

Because our efforts may not be directed toward scriptural goals; because we may not know for certain what Christ actually is saying today; it may be true that two tasks are set before us. The first task is to

search the Scriptures to discover what the supreme goal of the Christians efforts is to be. The second is to find out how the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Chief Executive Officer, wants to achieve this goal and the subordinate goals. The goals, and then the method of achieving the goals.

The Goals

The principal goal in the Kingdom of God always is to do God's will. But because this goal overlaps the second task, which is to find out how the Lord Jesus Christ wants to achieve His purposes, we will not cite doing God's will as the supreme goal of Christian efforts.

Rather, we will set the supreme goal of Christian efforts as bringing God's creatures to perfect, eternal joy.

A secondary goal, then, is to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth. The Kingdom of God brings righteousness; righteousness brings peace; and peace brings the end product--joy. "In Your Presence is fullness of joy."

In order to establish and operate the Kingdom of God on the earth, certain roles and tasks must be performed. These include the creating of a dwelling place for God; the maturing of the brothers of Jesus Christ; and the perfecting of the members of Bride of the Lamb and of the Body of Christ. And there are many other roles and tasks required for the establishing and operating of the Kingdom of God.

In order for the roles and tasks to be performed, the members of the royal priesthood must be conformed to the moral image of Christ and brought into untroubled union in God through Christ.

Because of this hierarchy of goals, the immediate goal that should guide Christians efforts consists of two parts: bringing the believers to the stature of the fullness of Christ; bringing the believers into rest in the center of God's Person and will such that they are living by the power and wisdom of His Life.

The principal goal is joy. The means to joy is the setting up and operating of the Kingdom of God. The setting up and operating of the Kingdom of God requires the performance of several roles and tasks. The performance of the roles and tasks of the Kingdom requires people who have been changed into the image of Christ and are dwelling in untroubled rest in the Person and will of God.

This is the hierarchy of goals. To be effective, all Christian efforts should be performed in the light of these goals. If our efforts are not contributing to the achievement of these goals, the efforts need to be reviewed carefully to see if they should be modified or eliminated.

The goal of change into the image of Christ.

In the fourth chapter of the Book of Ephesians. Paul states the goal of change into the image of Christ. Paul reveals that all of the gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit operate for the purpose of bringing the believers to the stature of the fullness of Christ. These gifts and ministries range from evangelism, which brings new members into the Kingdom of God, to pastoring and teaching, which build up the believers in the Head, in Jesus Christ.

All of the gifts and ministries operate to conform the believers to the full moral image of Christ.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, o prepare God's people for works of service, so the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining

to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

Can you see the goal here? Any person who has studied systems will understand immediately that what we have here is the goal of the ministries and gifts of the Spirit.

"Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Can you see that when we make the number of people in an assembling the gauge of the spiritual value of the assembling, we are employing an incorrect criterion? The spiritual value of an assembling must be measured in terms of the goal, which is that the believers come to the "whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

If the goal of a company were to manufacture computers, and the company turned out thousands of excellently constructed carrying cases, we might congratulate the executives on the excellency and quantity of the cases, but would remind them that they are supposed to be making computers.

In the same manner, if a denomination turns out hundreds of thousands of members, but very few of them are coming to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, then we might remind the executives of the denomination that while they are to be congratulated on their marketing abilities, they are not achieving the stated goals of the enterprise.

Obviously, it is not enough to persuade a person to confess Christ as his savior, and then never direct him into cross-carrying obedience; never lead him in the presenting of his body a living sacrifice; never work with him as the Spirit of God brings him through challenging circumstances.

Sometimes it is said that if we will keep growing, growing, growing in numbers the discipling will take care of itself. This does not work out in practice. A brief examination of today's Christian churches will suggest nurseries filled with babies--babies whose growth has been aborted because they have been fed grace-grace-grace-rapture-rapture-rapture-Heaven-Heaven-Heaven.

Today's believers are almost entirely ignorant of the demands of discipleship (there are noteworthy exceptions). Because of the stress on numbers, the church services are aimed at gaining new members. In many instances, the moving of the Spirit is not permitted during the church "service" lest it offend the visitors. You can be certain such services will not bring the believers to the full maturity in Christ.

It may be true that on occasion the need for discipleship is met in home groups that operate outside of the main assembling. In this instance, the home groups are the actual churches and are accomplishing the work of the Kingdom.

It can be seen, then, that the goal of change into the moral image of Christ, that to which we have been predestined, is not always being accomplished. Why not? Because we have set before us an unscriptural goal--that of gaining as many members as possible without regard for the need to achieve the scriptural goal of maturity in Christ. The American churches are filled with immature believers who are far more interested in the Super Bowl than they are in bearing their cross after the Lord Jesus.

So much for the goal of being changed into the image of Christ. The second aspect of the goal of Christian effort is that of working with the believers until they are abiding in the Person and will of God.

The goal of abiding in the Person and will of God. In the third chapter of the Book of Philippians, Paul states the goal of abiding in the Person and will of God and living by His Life.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, And so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10,11)

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:14)

Paul clearly states the goal of his discipleship. It is to know Christ, to know the power of Christ's resurrection, to share the sufferings of Christ, to become like Christ in His death.

Paul equates this union with Christ as perfection, and as attainment to the first resurrection, the resurrection that is out from among the dead.

We have no vagueness here. Paul was driving toward a specific objective.

Thus we find the New Testament furnishes us with a goal that is in two parts. The first part is transformation into the image of Christ. The second part is entrance into resurrection life lived in the Presence of God.

Now we can understand why the current stress on numbers of converts is misleading and not a true criterion of the worth of an assembling of Christians, or of a denomination. There may be ten thousand, a hundred thousand, five million members. But if they are not being changed into the image of Christ and are not being brought into rest in the Person and will of God, then our efforts are misdirected. We are building little that is of eternal worth, even though we are spending millions of dollars.

The Method of Achieving the Goals

We have examined the scriptural goal of the system. Now let's think about the scriptural method for achieving the scriptural goal.

The scriptural method is to seek God until we hear from Him. The Lord Jesus Christ is not far away in some distant heaven. The Lord Jesus is the High Priest of God. He walks among the golden lampstands, the churches that bear His name.

Christ always is ready to provide us with wisdom, knowledge, direction, timing, strength, money, and whatever else we need to accomplish His goals for His churches. The goal of the Lord Jesus is to build up the believers until they can perform the roles and tasks of the Kingdom of God, thus bringing the creation to perfect joy in the Lord.

But what have the churches done for two thousand years? For the most part they have labored unceasingly, as they are doing today, in terms of their own wisdom and strength.

The fact that one Christian church would persecute another, or that Christians would persecute Jews, is evidence that the believers are not hearing from Christ. Christ never, never, never directs Christian people to persecute other Christian people, or to persecute Jews, or to harm anyone else. This is not the way of Christ and we all ought to understand this.

The fact that the Catholics and Protestants are fighting against one another in Ireland is proof positive that neither group is hearing from God.

The competition among churches and denominations reveals the adamic nature of fallen man, not the loving voice of the Spirit of God.

It seems to be worse than ever today. Brochures come through the mail advertising this charismatic speaker, or that expert who knows how to promote the Gospel. Sometimes the name of Jesus Christ does not appear one time on the pamphlet.

I think the word for today is:

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 him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

The call is to the individual. "Will you, from among this multitude of believers, listen to me and allow me to eat with you? You will partake of my flesh and blood. I will partake of your worship and obedience. We will have sweet fellowship together."

Not too long ago Audrey and I were at a meeting during which plans were being made for Christian work. The ideas of several people were presented. The Lord spoke to Audrey and said: "Will you also leave Me?"

Audrey knew exactly what the Lord meant. He was referring to the abundance of manmade plans and asking Audrey if she would focus her mind on what people were proposing instead of looking to Him for every decision.

I have made a practice over the last few years of looking to the Lord for every decision. No matter how small the decision, like what and when to eat; or how great the decision, such as where we should live--all decisions are being brought to Jesus.

Now I am making a practice of "checking in" every five minutes or so. I will say, "I am checking in, Lord." I am looking to see if I am doing the right thing or if I need to change something.

The Lord speaks to me. I know all believers do not have the same gift. But I am certain if any Christian will make a habit of "checking in" many times during the day, the Lord will either speak to him or her or else provide guidance in some other manner according to the personality of the individual.

When we commit our way to the Lord He always directs our path.

"What needless pain we bear when we do not carry everything to God in prayer," according to the old hymn. "Trust and obey for there is no other way."

"If anyone hears My voice." The fears, duties, and ambitions that drive us, even in Christian work, prevent our hearing His voice. We rush forward, assuming we are doing God's will. But we are not waiting to hear.

Our generation needs to hear what God is saying. The denominations and churches need to hear from God. They work diligently, but perhaps they are not doing what Christ wants. But they have no way of knowing because they are not listening. They do not have ears to hear, it seems.

But will Christ guide us in this intimate fashion? Of course He will. He is building His Church. None of us has seen the blueprint, we may be just assuming what He desires. Christ is more than willing to tell us what it is we are to do, the part we are to play--and this detail by detail! Christ is both able and willing to work with us, confirming His Word with signs following.

The two witnesses of the eleventh chapter of the Book of Revelation are Christ and the members of His Body. I know they are thought to be two old prophets. But time will prove that it is Christ and His Body who will bear the last great testimony of the coming of the Kingdom of God. We can be part of that witness, but only if we are willing to cease from our own plans and follow the Spirit of God.

Sometimes the Book of Acts is studied as though it is a manual of directions for missionary work. It is nothing of the kind. It is an account of the manner in which Christ through the Holy Spirit directed the early apostles and evangelists.

We are not to copy what the Holy Spirit did in those days. We are to go to Christ and find out how He wants to accomplish His objectives today.

Following are some examples from the Book of Acts of direct guidance by the Holy Spirit.

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." (Acts 5:19,20)

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55,56)

Notice that the members of the Sanhedrin, religious Jews well versed in the Law of Moses, were blind to the will of God. So it is true that all religious workers, whether Christian or not, are blind to the will of God if they are not in continual interaction with the living Jesus.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (Acts 8:26)

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:3,4)

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." (Acts 10:19,20)

We could go on and on, of course. Someone has ventured that the Acts of the Apostles would be better named The Acts of the Holy Spirit. And rightly so!

We can make all sorts of excuses why we do not hear from the Lord today, such as, "These interventions were necessary when the Church was being established, but now we have the New Testament so we do not need to have the Lord speak to us."

Is that a fact?

Today the wheat of righteousness and the tares of wickedness are coming to maturity. The nations of the world are at each other's throats. The United States itself is being challenged by the need to find new

ways to preserve the American way of life.

And we do not need to hear from the Lord? I don't believe this is correct.

It is true, of course, that the apostles and evangelists made many decisions without a direct revelation from Christ. However, Christ intervened at enough points of decision that the apostles were kept on the path that God desired.

Today large programs for saving or assisting mankind are set in motion without anyone hearing directly from the Lord. The assumption is that if we are "trying to get souls saved" we are performing the Great Commission. In actual fact, the Great Commission does not direct us to "go out and get souls saved." Rather the emphasis is on making disciples.

Even if we began to pursue the scriptural goal of making disciples, we still need to hear from God at every point of action. Nothing of eternal worth in the Kingdom is performed apart from the direction and assistance of the Holy Spirit.

One can see large institutions, the possessions of the historic denominations, that today are devoid of the Spirit of God. At one time they were products of the works of the Holy Spirit and were filled with fire and life. Today they are relics--a reminder that at one time Christ had passed that way. What was commenced in the Spirit was completed in the flesh.

Conclusion

We have stated that if a system is to be efficient it must have clearly defined goals. Those goals must be decided by the persons who have the authority to establish the goals of the system. In the case of the Kingdom of God, it is God alone who has the authority to establish the goals of the system and to operate the system.

The hierarchy of goals, from bottom to top, is as follows:

- 1 The operation of gifts and ministries; which produce goal 2:
2. Believers in the complete image of Christ and dwelling in untroubled union with God through Christ; which makes possible goal 3:
3. The performance of the roles and tasks necessary for the installation and operation of the Kingdom of God on the earth; which produces goal 4:
4. The installation and operation of the Kingdom of God on the earth; which creates goal 5:
5. Perfect joy for the creatures of God.

Every detail of every aspect of each of the elements of the above hierarchy must be directly supervised by the Lord Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

But we often are not willing to wait for God to tell us what to do! You can imagine the grief this is causing the Lord Jesus Christ, for He can accomplish His will only through obedient servants who are listening carefully to all He is saying.

It may be true that in most Christian denominations and churches, the goal is to get as many people "saved" as possible. The standard of being saved ranges all the way from the requirement to be baptized in water even though this action in some countries will result in certain death, all the way to merely opening one's eyes and looking at the speaker who is giving the "altar call"--and everything in between.

Careful statistics are kept as to how many have been "saved," as well as how many have become members of the denomination or church.

The worth of a church is determined by how many are saved each year and how rapidly the number of members is growing.

Those of us who have been Christians for any length of time realize some of God's most powerful works are done in "stables." In fact, the Old Testament is an account of how God used individuals, while the remainder of the elect were continually falling away.

When we turn to the New Testament we notice that the stated goal is to make disciples, to conform them to the image of Christ and to bring them into untroubled rest in the Person and will of God. We would look a long time in the New Testament to find any exhortation to go forth and bring in new members. Rather the emphasis is on gaining victory over worldliness, lust, and self-will.

To a great extent we are working in our own strength and wisdom and pursuing unscriptural objectives. We are seeking new members while the Lord is seeking new creatures.

The great need today is to hear from the Lord. What is Jesus saying? Is He telling us to go out and build as many churches as we can and fill them with as many people as we can? Is this what Christ is actually saying? We do not know, we just assume this is what He wants. Because we are not sons of God we are being led by our traditions and assumptions rather than by the Spirit of God.

Speaking for myself, I think Jesus is telling the Christian people in America to repent. We are seeking bigger and bigger churches. Meanwhile the people already in the churches are bound horribly.

A significant number of the believers were molested as children. The Lord wants us to help them confess their burden so they can be released. We are missing the mark when we are encouraging such victims to "go out and get souls saved" while they are struggling to survive emotionally.

In numerous instances the believers are bound with unforgiveness. It is nothing more than the voice of Babylon, man-motivated religion, that encourages such psychologically and spiritually crippled individuals to "help us take the city for Christ."

The Lord is coming to His churches today to prepare us for the age of moral horrors we are entering. I think most Christians are unprepared for the demands that will be made on us. In fact, I think war is coming to the United States. We are going to have to know how to walk with Jesus if we are not to find ourselves screaming in fear because of the danger to our children, and otherwise being of no use whatever to the people of the world who are looking for God's help.

Economic collapse, war, disease, are at the door. We are continuing to seek new members when the believers already present are not able to resist the temptation of the pornography on the Internet.

What can we do as an individual Christian?

We can come out of this mad, babylonish rush to "do something for God." We can seek His face. We can wait, wait, wait on the Lord until we know what He wants us to do.

He may or may not speak to us in a clear voice. But He certainly will guide us if we are willing to cease charging about in our own enthusiasm and set time aside each day to pray and meditate in His Word, and not make major decisions or plans concerning Christian work until we hear from Christ.

I am certain the Lord Jesus Christ is ready to bring an unprecedented witness to the world. He is not going to bring this witness according to our ideas. He will do new things. Gifted people no longer will be exalted. That day is over. It is a "sackcloth" ministry that is on the horizon.

The Lord alone shall be exalted during the coming days. The efforts of the flesh will decrease in effectiveness. It is God facing Satan. Christ facing Antichrist. The Holy Spirit facing the False Prophet. We humans are but the dust of the ground. The warfare is between spiritual titans.

Will we or will we not cease attempting to build the Kingdom of God by means of our own wisdom and strength? Certainly the two thousand years of Church history should instruct us concerning the folly of the efforts of the flesh, when it comes to establishing and operating the Kingdom of God.

I cannot speak for you. But as for me, I want nothing to do with human plans--mine or anyone else's. I want to hear from the Lord Jesus, and I want to hear twenty-four hours of every day, seven days a week.

I would like to entice you to come along with me on this wonderful adventure of walking with Jesus on the water through every storm that the future brings.

Hi Lord! Just checking in.

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