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## **TRULY RICH OR APPEARING SPIRITUALLY RICH**

Let me begin with a question: Do you attend church meetings regularly, pray and read the Scriptures often and contribute to the Lord's work readily?

If your answer is yes, you may think that you are spiritually healthy. Others may also think you are faring well. But is it really true?

From the Lord's teaching, we see two categories of people who appear rich but are in reality poor. One category is those who are materially rich. They are like the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus – regarded by people in the world as well-off because of their material wealth, but are poor spiritually.

The other category is those who appear to be spiritually rich or who regard themselves to be so. They project the impression that they are spiritually rich when they are not. Being in this state is worse than those who know they are spiritually poor. It is difficult to help such people fare well.

In this message, we shall concentrate on this second category.

### **Appearing spiritually rich – the church in Laodicea**

In Revelation 3:14-22, the Lord Jesus had strong words for the church in Laodicea.

#### **Revelation 3:14-22**

14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

15 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot.

16 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

17 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

19 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

20 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

21 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

22 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' "

The believers in Laodicea thought they were spiritually rich (v. 17), and therefore had no need of anything. The Lord Jesus revealed to them that they were actually "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked". They were blind to their poor spiritual state. They needed to see their true state and repent, otherwise the Lord Jesus "will spit" them out of His mouth.

We have to beware of a false sense of spiritual well-being. Remember the Pharisees. They prayed long prayers, fasted regularly and tithed faithfully. They considered themselves to be spiritual leaders of the day and were also regarded as such by many. Yet, they were condemned by the Lord Jesus.

Even as they thought highly of themselves, they also looked upon others with pity, condescension, and even contempt. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14 illustrates the attitude of the Pharisees.

#### **Luke 18:9-14**

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Lord Jesus described the Pharisee as praying "to himself", thanking God that he was not like the others, whom he regarded with contempt. He commended himself for his own faithfulness – he fasted twice a week and paid tithes of all he got. But the

Lord Jesus proclaimed that it was not the Pharisee, but the tax-collector, who was justified.

### **How do we know whether we are truly rich?**

What distinguishes the truly rich from those who only appear to be so? How do we make sure that we are truly rich? Are we truly faring well from the perspective of God's kingdom? It is vital that we have a clear understanding of the answers to these questions. The primary issue that determines whether we are truly rich is the reality within our hearts. Do we have zeal and love for God? Do we have positive motivation within?

#### *Zeal and love for God*

The believers in Laodicea were lukewarm. They lacked true zeal and love for the Lord, and were thus rejected by Him.

We may do many things outwardly and even do them with enthusiasm. We may then think our love for God is deep, and we express sincerely the desire to do great things for God. But in reality, our enthusiasm may be superficial and merely emotional, and such enthusiasm must not be confused with true zeal.

True zeal and love for God arise from a deep response to the Holy Spirit working in our hearts, and the deep response gives birth to true and strong convictions. It is not merely an enthusiastic response to some outward stimuli. It is a response based on strong convictions that are firmly grounded in the truth. Such convictions will guard us from being easily deceived or discouraged.

#### *Positive motivation*

The motivation for what we do is very important because what motivates us gives our outward expressions their true meaning.

For example, consider what motivates us to read the Scriptures, pray and attend meetings. Are we doing these things out of habit, because others expect us to, or because we want to impress others? If we do them for these reasons, we are in a poor spiritual state.

What we say and do – whether reading the Scriptures, praying or having fellowship with the brethren – should be motivated by our love for God, for truth and for others. Our expressions of concern for others are meaningful only if they are truly motivated by love – a genuine concern for and commitment to their well-being.

## **Further reflections on the words of the Lord Jesus to the church in Laodicea**

### *Spiritual blindness, spiritual pride and the need to repent*

The believers in Laodicea were lukewarm in their faith and they were not even aware of it. They were blind to their true state and thought they were spiritually rich.

Beyond their inaccurate assessment of themselves and their false sense of well-being, they were also arrogant. They felt they had need of nothing. Spiritual pride is a serious defect in character and spirit, and a major hindrance to learning and receptivity. Those who are truly rich will not have this negative attitude.

Even if we are growing well, it would still be improper to say that we have need of nothing. In fact, we would have a stronger sense of our need of God and a growing hunger to know Him more. We would know we are far short of God's intentions for us in Christ. We would long for a greater experience of the infinite grace and riches of God. We would want to scale greater spiritual heights.

If we feel that we have need of nothing, it is an indication that we have become spiritually complacent. We think we already know, and we lose the eagerness to learn. In due time, this spiritual pride will close our hearts to the truth. If we have even a tinge of the attitude that we already know and there is little that others can teach us, we are in a pitiful state.

The Laodicean Christians were actually "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked". They were spiritually poor and they needed help to see their true state and repent. The Lord advised them to "buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see" (v. 18).

### *Gold refined by fire – true riches*

The Lord Jesus told the Laodicean Christians they needed to "buy" from Him gold refined by fire so that they could become truly rich. The gold here refers to true spiritual riches that will endure. Such spiritual riches can come about only when we abide in Christ.

In John 15, the Lord Jesus teaches us how we can bear good fruit.

#### **John 15:4-5**

4 "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.

5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

The only way we can bear true fruit that has enduring value is by our abiding in Christ and His abiding in us. This is the only way we can become truly rich.

#### *White garments – a righteous life*

The Laodiceans were "naked". The Lord advised them to buy "white garments" to clothe themselves. "White garments" refers to a life of truth and righteousness. Revelation 19:8 tells us the bride of the Lamb was clothed in fine linen, bright and clean, and that the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

Such a life is feasible because of what was accomplished by the Lord Jesus on the Cross. As we respond positively to the risen Christ, our fellowship with Him and His working in us bring about a life of righteousness. Our outward expressions of faith must flow from this inward reality.

#### *Eye salve – spiritual insight*

The Laodiceans needed spiritual insight, so the Lord advised them to get eye salve to anoint their eyes so that they may see. The eyes of their heart must see clearly their true spiritual state – that they were spiritually poor, wretched and miserable – so that they can repent, turn to the Lord and grow in spiritual health and richness. They must recognise their need and come to the Lord because only He can grant them spiritual insight.

#### *Humble and contrite spirit*

Believers who are generally healthy may still stumble and falter in their faith. If corrective measures are not taken, degeneration will set in. God loves His children and He reaches out to those whom He loves. He will reprove them and discipline them in order to help them repent and return to Him. In Revelation 3:19, we see the Lord calling upon the church in Laodicea to repent.

When God reproves us in whatever form, it is imperative that we respond positively to Him. We must be humble and contrite and open to His discipline.

There are many who have once been spiritually rich, but have degenerated to spiritual poverty. It is likely that the Christians in Laodicea were once spiritually rich. They had benefitted from the ministry of the apostle Paul and his co-worker, Epaphras. Let us look at some passages in Colossians.

**Colossians 2:1-3**

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face,

2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself,

3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

**Colossians 4:12-13**

12 Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondslave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

13 For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

**Colossians 4:15-16**

15 Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house.

16 When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.

Paul and Epaphras struggled hard for the Christians, including those in Laodicea, that they might attain to a life abounding in spiritual wealth, grounded in a true knowledge of Christ and what God intends for us in Him (Col. 2:1-3). There was deep concern and earnest labour for their spiritual health and growth. When Paul wrote to the Christians at Colossae, he also expressed concern for those in Laodicea. In Colossians 4:16, we see Paul requesting that his letter be read to the Christians in Laodicea as well and indicated that he had also written another letter to them.

When we have a meaningful experience of God and have tasted of His goodness, we must be careful to guard against pride and having the attitude of "I already know it all".

The Lord Jesus told the Laodicean Christians: "If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me". The Lord wants us to have rich fellowship with Him. He takes the initiative by standing at the door and knocking. If anyone opens the door, He *will* dine with him. It is indeed foolishness to shut our ears to His voice.

The Lord exhorts us to overcome. "He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne" (Rev. 3:21). The overcoming life – one of true riches – is open to all.

Let us heed the final words of the Lord Jesus in verse 22: "He who has an ear, let him hear ..." When the Lord Jesus speaks in this way, it is an indication that He has said something important. We cannot be careless and disregard the words of the Lord Jesus to the church in Laodicea and the implications for our own lives.

### **How to make sure we are truly rich**

#### *1. Gain spiritual insight and walk in truth*

Believers need spiritual insight to have a proper appreciation of the truth and an accurate perception of things. For this reason, Paul prayed earnestly for believers so that they may have the eyes of their heart enlightened (Eph. 1:18).

Whether it be our personal reading of the Scriptures or when we listen to someone expounding it, true insight is vital. Spiritual insight can come about through the Lord helping us in our earnest searching and prayer. But even when there is hardness of heart, the Lord may at times still speak to us as we listen to messages and as we go through life's situations. When our hearts have been enlightened to see the truth, we must align our hearts with the truth, absorb it into our lives and live according to it faithfully.

To benefit from the truth, all three aspects must be present: spiritual insight into the truth, absorption of the truth into our hearts and living our lives accordingly. This is the way to spiritual richness and fruitfulness.

This is also the way to grow in scope and depth of spiritual insight. There are varying depths of appreciation and spiritual insight into any area of truth, for example, the meaning of God's sovereignty and His love for us. There is no limit to the insight one can have into the meaning and implications of the truth. It is therefore important for us to always seek to deepen our insight into the truth so that we can deepen our walk in the truth.

To be truly rich and never degenerate into the state of the Laodicean Christians, we must continually make sure that our primary motivation is love for the Lord and for the truth. This must be the basis for our lives and for our response to people and situations. When we love the truth, we will long to know it so that we can absorb it into our hearts and walk in it.

#### *2. Do not neglect what is more important – the inward reality*

In Matthew 23, the Lord Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees not to concentrate on proper outward forms and "neglect the weightier provisions of the law".

### **Matthew 23:23**

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

Like the scribes and Pharisees, we could be emphasising on right conduct and expressions in Christian living – reading the Scriptures, attending church meetings, praying, giving, keeping our time with God, proper dressing and being thrifty. But we could be neglecting what is more important – our inner life and reality.

While observing proper conduct, it is important that we pay attention to our inward qualities – our character, our values and our relationship with God. This is what the Lord Jesus was trying to communicate to the scribes and Pharisees. It is only when there are true inward qualities that meaningful outward expressions can come forth.

#### *3. Nurture deep spiritual and moral realities*

To make sure that we do not live in a state of deception like the church in Laodicea, we must pay attention to the spiritual and moral realities in our own life and in the life of the congregation, and these have to do with our relationship with the Lord, the quality of our character and our attitudes.

It is vital that we maintain and nurture a healthy spirit and attitude at all times. Some may ask: How do we know whether our spirit and attitude are healthy? When something is amiss in our spirit or attitude, it is usually not difficult to recognise it. For example, if there is pride, jealousy, frustration, complacency, discouragement or self-confidence, we should be able to know. These wrong spirit and attitudes are opposed to the Spirit of God, and if we seek to be right with Him, He will make it known to us. But we must be prayerful and honest with ourselves, and sincerely seek to do what is right in God's sight. When we have such a posture, we can more readily see what is amiss in our lives and take corrective action.

#### *4. Avoid unwholesome emphasis on inner life*

While it is needful to emphasise the importance of the inner life, we must be careful not to do so in an unwholesome way.

There is a category of people known as mystics. They emphasise very strongly on the inner life. Some of them have strange practices. Some live in isolation, usually in remote places, in pursuit of their idea of spirituality. They may reject the world's values and seek inner peace through mystical practices.

Some of these mystics do have deep and genuine experiences of God and are sincerely devoted to Him. However, there are dangers in over-emphasising inner experiences of God. When people seek spiritual experiences without being well-



grounded in the Scriptures, they may be deceived. Even those who initially have genuine experiences of God can be deceived by the evil one and may go far astray because of their concentration on pursuing spiritual experiences. The evil one may grant them spiritual experiences which they receive as from the Lord. These can include pleasant experiences of joy and peace and seeing visions. They may also receive and carry out instructions, thinking they are obeying the Lord.

Those who have inner experiences may become proud and think they are more spiritual than those who do not have such experiences. Some may also think that they are having deep spiritual experiences of joy and peace when in fact what they are experiencing are merely superficial and primarily emotional.

If our attitudes are negative, the danger is great. But even if our attitudes are positive, we still have to be vigilant.

#### *5. Exercise appropriate outward expressions*

Appropriate outward expressions are important and can help us in two ways:

##### *a. Outward expressions help us recognise the reality of our inner state.*

The Lord Jesus says: "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matt. 12:34). True spiritual health and attitudes will be expressed in our conduct and words and reflected in the fruit of our spiritual labour. When we truly abide in Christ and He in us, we will bear much fruit (John 15:5). And we should be "bearing fruit in every good work" (Col. 1:10). When there is inner reality, there will be meaningful practical expressions in our daily life.

If our practical outworking is poor, and yet we think we are spiritually rich, we may be deceiving ourselves and fail to recognise our true state. When we manifest negative traits and ways – for example, when we are impatient or inconsiderate towards others, when our priorities are wrong and we use much of our resources and time on worldly pursuits – it is unlikely that our inner state is right. We may have been spiritually rich in times past, but we are now spiritually poor and blind. Let us ask the Lord to help us see our true state, and then repent and put right our lives.

##### *b. Outward expressions help us nurture our inward reality, relationship with God and understanding of truth.*

Our walk with the Lord will deepen when we properly express love and kindness, and consistently observe the spiritual disciplines of reading and searching the Scriptures, prayer and fasting, attending church meetings and spending time in fellowship with the brethren because we want to be faithful to Him. When we work out the truths we have come to understand, we will have a deeper appreciation and understanding of the truths. The realities within our hearts will deepen and we will be drawn closer to God.

## *6. Maintain balanced approach and emphasis on inner reality and appropriate expressions*

Our approach to life should be wholesome and according to what God has revealed in the Scriptures – with the right emphasis on both inner reality and appropriate expressions.

The biblical approach emphasises the nurturing of the inward reality: true and deep love for God and His ways, zeal for a deep relationship with God, godly character and spiritual values and a sound understanding of the truth. From such a life of truth and righteousness, expressions of faith must then flow forth – in appropriate words and deeds, consistent with biblical revelation and principles.

The wholesome, biblical approach can be summarised in this way: Believers ought to nurture positive inward realities based on sound knowledge of truths revealed in the Scriptures and express these truths appropriately in their lives.

### **Concluding remarks**

Let us reflect over the issues we have considered in this message.

Are you materially rich and doing well by the world's standards, but in reality spiritually poor? Do you think you are spiritually rich and also regarded by others to be so, but are in reality spiritually poor, miserable and wretched? Will you be content if you are spiritually rich though materially poor?

It is important that we come before the Lord and ask Him to search our hearts and help us see clearly whether we are truly spiritually rich or actually spiritually poor.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. How do we know whether we are truly rich?
2. The Lord Jesus had strong words for the church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22). What can we learn from these words of the Lord about being truly poor and truly rich?
3. How can we make sure we are truly rich?

Some people believe that a person who is truly rich in God will have deep and mystical inner experiences of God. What are the dangers of over-emphasising inner experiences of God?

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