

LESSON FIVE

**CHRIST IN THREE STAGES
&
SANCTIFYING, CLEANSING, NOURISHING AND CHERISHING (1)**

Scripture Reading:

Eph. 5:25 Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her

Eph. 5:26 That He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of the water in the word,

Eph. 5:27 That He might present the church to Himself glorious, not having spot or wrinkle or any such things, but that she would be holy and without blemish.

Eph. 5:28 In the same way the husbands also ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his own wife loves himself.

Eph. 5:29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ also the church,

Questions:

Section 1

1. What is the positive aspect of flesh from God's point of view? Why is it necessary for God to be a God-man?
2. How do we know that God wants us to be very human?
3. How can we know that Christ as our person is present with us?

Section 2

1. What is the difference between outward cleansing and inward metabolic cleansing?
2. What is the way for us to have the proper church life?
3. What is the result of experiencing the Lord's speaking within us as the life giving spirit?

Section 3

1. Who is God's economy concerning? How is it possible we could be distracted when coming to the Bible?
2. What does dispositional sanctification mean compared to positional sanctification?
3. Can you share experiences of Christ's imparting Himself into you through His speaking?

Section 4

1. What is the difference between sanctification and cleansing?
2. What should our burden be when speaking to others from the Bible?
3. What is the purpose of Christ's cherishing and nourishing in Ephesians 5:29 and how do we experience it?

[Section 1]

Ephesians 5:25-27 presents Christ to us in three stages. Verse 25 says that Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Here we see Christ in the stage of the flesh. Verse 26 speaks of Christ sanctifying the church, cleansing her by the washing of the water in the Word. In this verse we have Christ in the stage of the life-giving Spirit. Finally, a third stage of Christ is revealed in verse 27, which speaks of Christ presenting the church to Himself in His coming back. Hence, in this stage Christ will be the Bridegroom receiving His Bride. The first of these three stages was in the past, the second is in the present, and the third will be in the future. In the first stage Christ was the Redeemer; in the second, He is the life-giving Spirit; and in the third, He will be the Bridegroom.

In this message we need to consider certain points found in these verses. However, I wish to point out that our concern is not doctrinal. In the Lord's recovery there is no need for us to pay very much attention to doctrine. The important matter is that we see what a Christ we have and come to experience and enjoy Him more and more.

THE GOD-MAN

Although Christ is God, He is not God only. If He were simply God, He could not be our Christ. To be the Christ to us, He had to be incarnated. Through incarnation, Christ became a man with flesh, blood, and bones. How wonderful that God put on human nature! Our God is not merely God. In Christ He has become a God-man.

It was in the flesh that the Lord gave Himself up for us. If He had not given Himself up as a man in the flesh, there would have been no way for us to gain Him. We are not spirits; we are flesh. Angels are spirits. God has no intention for us to become spirits like angels. God's concern is not with angels, but with men of flesh. Nothing is more pleasing to God than a man of flesh. At times we regret that we are fleshly. However, if we see ourselves from God's point of view, we shall realize that there is a positive aspect of the flesh. According to Hebrews 2, Christ did not take on the nature of angels, but He did take on blood and flesh. Furthermore, John 1 says that the Word which was God and was with God became flesh (v. 14). Great is the mystery of godliness—God was manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). God cannot be manifest in angels; He can be manifest only in the flesh. The portion of the angels is to behold the manifestation of God in the flesh.

The Word became flesh and God was manifested in the flesh. Yes, we must condemn the sinful

flesh. But there is also a positive aspect of the flesh. We are not spirits as angels are—we are flesh! Our Christ did not become an angelic spirit; He became flesh. The Christ who gave Himself up for us was God incarnate.

If Christ had not put on human nature, it would be impossible for us to receive Him into us. The very Christ we take as our person is the God-man. It is impossible for us to take in God directly. Only after God has become the God-man can we take Him into our being to be our life and our person.

A PROPER HUMAN LIFE

Some Christians think that they should behave as if they were angels. They try to live like heavenly beings. In the eyes of God, this kind of living is abnormal. He does not want His children to imitate angels; on the contrary, He wants them to be very human. All the members of the church should have a genuine humanity. For this reason, Ephesians, a book dealing with the church, covers various human relationships: the relationship between wife and husband, between children and parents, between servants and masters. In order to have a proper church life, we must have a proper human life.

The very Christ we have received and gained is not an angel or some kind of heavenly being, but a God-man. It was as a man in the flesh that He gave Himself up for us. Furthermore, it is as a man that He is able to fit into our situation and meet our need. He has put on human nature in order to be like us. Now He lives in us as our life and as our person to be manifested from within us. When a sister takes Christ as her person in submitting to her husband, her submission will be glorious, full of the reality of Christ lived out from within her. Likewise, when a brother takes Christ as his person in loving his wife, Christ will be expressed in his love for her. Such a manifestation of Christ is possible because as the God-man He gave Himself up for us.

THE SPEAKING SPIRIT

According to verse 26, Christ gave Himself up for the church so that "He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of the water in the word." After the Lord Jesus gave Himself for us in the flesh, He was resurrected and in resurrection became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). As the life-giving Spirit, He is the speaking Spirit. Whatever He speaks is the word that washes us. The Greek word rendered word in verse 26 is not *logos*, the constant word, but *rhema*, which denotes the instant word, the word the Lord presently speaks to us. As the life-giving

Spirit, the Lord is not silent; He is constantly speaking. If you take Him as your person, you will discover how much He desires to speak within you. Idols are dumb, but the indwelling Christ is always speaking. No one who takes Christ as his life and his person can remain silent. On the contrary, he will be constrained by Christ to speak. As I minister to the Lord's children, I experience Christ speaking within me.

In John 6:63 the Lord Jesus said, "The words which I have spoken unto you are spirit and are life." The Greek word rendered words here is also *rhema*, the instant and present spoken word. This differs from *logos*, the constant word, as in John 1:1. As the speaking Spirit, the Lord is speaking the *rhema* to us. Whatever He speaks is spirit.

If day by day there is no speaking of the Lord within us, it is an indication that there is some problem within us. If there is no speaking, no *rhema*, then in our practical experience the Spirit is absent, for the Lord's speaking actually is the Spirit. As long as we have the Lord's present word, we have the Spirit, the life-giving Spirit. We cannot separate Christ as the life-giving Spirit from His speaking. His presence consists in His speaking. How can we know that Christ as our person is present with us? We know it by His speaking. If we do not have His speaking within us, we do not have His presence. But if we turn to Him to mean business to take Christ as our life and our person, His speaking will begin again. His speaking is the living word, the living word is the Spirit, and the Spirit is our wonderful Christ Himself. How practical, subjective, intimate, and real He is as the speaking Spirit!

[Section 2]

METABOLIC CLEANSING AND TRANSFORMATION

This Spirit is the water that washes us. The more the Spirit speaks, the more we are washed, cleansed. Every time He speaks within us we should experience cleansing.

This cleansing is a metabolic cleansing that removes what is old and replaces it with what is new. How different this is from some type of outward cleansing! It is by the inward, metabolic cleansing that we have transformation. By the metabolic cleansing that comes from the speaking of Christ as the life-giving Spirit, we are truly changed, transformed.

Because such an inward transformation is taking place within us, there is no need for outward correction in the church life. God's way in His economy is not to change us outwardly. His way

is for Christ to give Himself up for us and then to come into us as the life-giving Spirit. In a very practical sense, the Lord's presence is one with His speaking. Whenever He speaks, we realize His presence within us. This speaking of the life-giving Spirit within is the water that cleanses our inner being. This cleansing water deposits a new element into us to replace the old element in our nature and disposition. This metabolic cleansing causes a genuine change in life. This change is what we mean by transformation. Outward correction has no value. What the church needs is the inward metabolic cleansing that comes from allowing Christ as the life-giving Spirit to be our life and our person.

In verse 26 we have Christ not in the stage of the flesh, but in the stage of the life-giving Spirit. As we have pointed out, the life-giving Spirit is the speaking Spirit. Christ's speaking is the Spirit; it is the very presence of the life-giving Spirit. If we honor the speaking of the Spirit within us, the Spirit's speaking will become the water that cleanses, purifies, sanctifies, and supplies us with the element of Christ. This element replaces and discharges our old element and brings about genuine transformation. In this way we are purified and sanctified; in this way we also experience the practicality of the church life.

NOT OUTWARD CORRECTION, BUT CHRIST AS OUR LIFE AND PERSON

Suppose two brothers who live together in a brothers' house have a problem with each other. One may contact an elder for help, and another may go to an elderly sister for fellowship. The elder may tell the one brother that in the church life we all must learn patience, whereas the elderly sister may tell the other that the Lord has put him into his situation so he could learn certain lessons. Such advice may be mere religious talk. If these brothers try to follow it, they will have even greater problems. Eventually, they may choose to move out of the brothers' house and even leave the church life.

In the church life we do not need outward correction. Instead, the church life is a life in which we all take Christ as our life and person. The elders and the elderly sisters need to help the saints to realize that their need is to take the Lord Jesus as their person. The more all the saints do this, the more they will experience the speaking of Christ as the life-giving Spirit. This speaking will be to them the cleansing, purifying water. This water will spread the element of Christ throughout their being, and it will discharge all oldness. Eventually, brothers like those in the illustration above will no longer be bothered by

problems with each other, but will grow together and be built up together. This is the proper church life. Oh, how we all need the inward cleansing, the metabolic purification that transforms us!

What I am ministering to you in this message is something I have learned through years of experience in the Christian life as well as in the church life. I am familiar with various teachings concerning the inner life, holiness, and spirituality. Although I put these teachings into practice, most of them were not very effective. Many of us can testify that although we endeavored to practice what we read on holiness and spirituality, what we read did not work very well in our experience. Out of failure and disappointment many have come to believe that it simply is not possible to have the proper church life today. They claim that for this we must wait until the next age. By the Lord's mercy I can testify that it is possible to have the genuine church life. We have the church life not by trying to carry out teachings in an outward way, but by taking Christ as our life and as our person. Then we enjoy and experience Christ as the life-giving, speaking Spirit. We enjoy the speaking that cleanses us, transforms us, and causes us to grow.

As we grow in life, we are spontaneously built up with others. In such a building there is no place for division or strife concerning opinion and doctrine. We in the church in Los Angeles can testify that we do not care for opinions, suggestions, or proposals. We care only for taking Christ as our life and as our speaking person. We treasure His speaking because His presence as the life-giving Spirit is in His speaking. By His speaking He cleanses us, purifies, and sanctifies us. Eventually, all the spots and wrinkles are swallowed up by life.

A GLORIOUS CHURCH

Through the Lord's speaking within us as the life-giving Spirit, we are becoming a glorious church, a church holy and without blemish. Today we are waiting for the Lord's coming back, knowing that when He comes, He will present us to Himself a glorious church, holy and without blemish. At that time, we shall experience Christ in the third stage as the Bridegroom coming for His Bride. Until then, our need is to daily take Christ as our person and to be cleansed, purified, and sanctified through the speaking of the life-giving Spirit. In this way we shall undergo a metabolic change leading to the transformation in life which is necessary for the church life.

[Section 3]

God's economy is not a religion, but a wonderful, unlimited, immeasurable, unsearchable, and all-inclusive Person, Christ Jesus Himself. Christ is the embodiment of God and the content of the church. This Christ is to be our life and our person.

NOT RELIGION BUT A WONDERFUL PERSON

However, in today's Christianity God's economy has become a mere religion. Under the influence of this religion, Christians believe that God loved the world and gave His only begotten Son to die on the cross for our sins. After Christ's resurrection, He ascended to the heavens. Until He comes back, we are to study the Bible and follow its teachings. But teachings are not the living Person of Christ Himself. God's economy is not a matter of religion with doctrines and teachings; it is a matter of a wonderful, living Person. Now this Person must become our person. Our need today is not to be concerned with doctrine, but to be concerned with contacting the living Christ within us.

RECOVERED TO THE SUBJECTIVE CHRIST

Many Christians pay more attention to the Bible than to Christ. This indicates that even the Bible can be utilized to distract people from Christ. Surely, we believe, respect, and honor the Bible to the uttermost. But we recognize that the Bible is the revelation of the living Person of Christ. If we do not pay attention to the Christ revealed in the Bible, then we ignore the main function of the Bible, which is to reveal this very Christ to us. How we need to be recovered fully to Christ Himself!

We need to be recovered not merely to the objective Christ in the heavens, but to the subjective Christ in our spirit. This subjective One is seeking to spread Himself into our heart. Not only is Christ our Savior objectively, but He is our life and our person subjectively. We need to devote our full attention to such a subjective Christ. In Galatians 2:20 Paul could say, "Not I, but Christ who lives in me." Here Paul did not speak of the life of Christ, the work of Christ, or the power of Christ; he spoke of Christ Himself living in him. Hallelujah, the very Person of Christ is living in us!

In the foregoing message we pointed out that when Christ was in the flesh, He gave Himself up for us. Then in resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit. This life-giving Spirit is the One we are to take daily as our person. As the life-giving Spirit, Christ is washing us, sanctifying us,

cleansing us, nourishing us, and cherishing us. We shall consider these matters in this message.

BECOMING HOLY DISPOSITIONALLY

Perhaps you have heard messages or read books about sanctification. In order to know the true meaning of sanctification, we need to contact the life-giving Spirit indwelling our spirit. One aspect of sanctification involves separation. To be sanctified is to be separated positionally, to undergo a change of position. However, this is not the only aspect of sanctification. In sanctification something that once was natural gradually becomes holy in nature. Hence, as we are sanctified subjectively, we become holy dispositionally.

This aspect of sanctification can be illustrated by the process of making tea. When tea is placed in a cup of water, the water is “tea-ified.” As the water is “tea-ified,” it becomes tea-water. We can compare ourselves to the cup of water and Christ to the tea. Just as water is “tea-ified” by the element of tea, so we are sanctified by the element of Christ. Therefore, to be sanctified is to have Christ Himself added into our being. The more Christ is added into us, the more we have the appearance, taste, and aroma of Christ. Day by day, our need is to take more of Christ as the heavenly tea into us so that more of His element may be added into our being. In this way we shall be “Christ-ified.”

Suppose Christ were simply an objective Christ at the right hand of God in the heavens. Could we be sanctified dispositionally simply by trying to follow in an outward way the teachings of the Bible? Certainly not. Nothing of the element of Christ could be added into our being. We thank the Lord for showing us that subjective sanctification is a matter of having Christ added into us. The only way this can happen is by our taking Him as our life and as our person.

CHRIST’S INTENTION IN HIS SPEAKING

We have pointed out that when we take Christ as our person, we experience Him speaking in us as the life-giving Spirit. The Lord’s intention in His inward speaking is not simply to tell us to do certain things or not to do other things; it is to impart Himself into us by speaking to us. The more the Lord speaks within us, the more He imparts Himself into us. Whenever we tell the Lord that we want Him to be our person, He begins to speak within us.

Even if we do not hearken to His speaking, He will still impart Himself to us by His speaking. Many times we may disobey the Lord’s inner speaking, but He spreads within us a little more nevertheless. The Lord’s main concern is not with how much we obey Him, but with how much opportunity He has to impart Himself to us and to spread Himself within us. As soon as you say, “Lord Jesus, I take You as my person,” the Lord begins to impart Himself into you. However, should you change your mind and tell the Lord that you want to withdraw your promise, He will say, “Even if you withdraw your promise, I have already imparted Myself into you.” If we tell the Lord that we are not able to obey Him, He will reply, “I am not concerned whether or not you feel you are able to obey Me. I only care to be given the opportunity to get Myself into you.” Even as we are speaking to the Lord about not wanting to fulfill the promise we have made to Him or about being unable to obey Him, He is imparting Himself into us. The more we speak to Him, the more we are “Christ-ified.”

Sanctification comes from our dealing with the living Person of Christ. I have the full assurance that those who have told the Lord that they are willing to take Him as their person cannot escape the Lord’s speaking. As the Lord speaks, He imparts Himself into us. This impartation is sanctification.

[Section 4]

CLEANSED BY THE SUBJECTIVE CHRIST

We come now to cleansing. In sanctification a new element is added into us, whereas in cleansing a particular element is removed from us. We all need our natural disposition to be cleansed. No matter how good or kind you may be naturally your natural disposition is a problem. Furthermore, we have the problems of our habits, customs, and self-made ordinances. All these things need to be eradicated.

Contrary to religious teachings, we are not cleansed by self-correction. This means that we are not cleansed by dealing with ourselves in an outward way. For example, it is impossible to remove wrinkles, signs of oldness, by washing the skin outwardly. During our first period of time in the church life, we may experience a church honeymoon. However, inevitably oldness sets in and wrinkles appear. In order for our wrinkles to be removed, our youthfulness in life must be restored. As the life-giving Spirit, Christ is doing such a work of restoration among us today. Christ will not come back for a bride with

wrinkles. If we would be His Bride, we must be kept up to date with Him. Wrinkles are not taken away by teaching or by trying to obey the doctrines in the Bible. Wrinkles are removed as we take Christ as our person and allow Him to live in us. It is not the objective Christ in the heavens who cleanses us; on the contrary, it is the subjective Christ, the Christ so intimate and available, who cleanses us. Whenever we contact Him, we are refreshed, renewed, and made more youthful in life.

Ephesians 5:25 and 26 say that Christ gave Himself up for the church that He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of the water in the word. In the foregoing message we pointed out that the water in the word is Christ as the speaking Spirit. The more Christ speaks within us, the more He flows within us. This flowing water is not in the logos, the constant word, but in the rhema, the present, instant word. As this water washes us, it carries away our oldness. This washing is a metabolic washing. It supplies a new element to replace the old. This leads to transformation. Therefore, cleansing is not a matter of teaching, but a matter of taking Christ as our living person. When we take Him as our person, He adds Himself into us and washes us metabolically.

NOURISHED BY TAKING CHRIST AS OUR PERSON

In verse 29 there are two important words: nourish and cherish. To nourish is to feed. In the past many of us attended so-called Christian services or read the Bible without receiving any nourishment. But if we take Christ as our person, we shall experience Him nourishing us. We shall continually have the sense of His inward nourishment. To be nourished by Christ is to be supplied with His riches. I believe that we all have experienced the nourishment that comes from taking Christ as our person.

Nourishment brings about transformation. We all become what we eat. This means that if we eat Christ, we shall eventually be constituted with Christ. We shall be transformed by the element of Christ that has been dispensed into us. The more we take Christ as our person, the more He nourishes us. Through Christ's nourishment we are transformed. This means that we become a new person with a new element and substance. Hallelujah, Christ nourishes us with Himself, with the riches of all He is! What we need today is not doctrine or religion, but the enjoyment of the all-inclusive Christ.

OUR BURDEN

In these messages our burden is not to pass on more teachings to the saints. Our burden is to minister the living Christ. Today the need of the Lord's people is to take Christ as their person for nourishment. Because we are conscious of this need, we are not interested in mere objective teachings. Our desire is to help others come in touch with the living Christ, to open to Him, and to take Him as their life and person. I hope that many will say, "Lord, I have been a Christian for years, but I have not taken You as my person. Lord, by Your mercy, I want to begin now to take You as my person." If your husband or wife troubles you and you are tempted to exchange words, that is the time to take Christ as your person. Instead of arguing with others or defending ourselves, we should allow Christ to make His home in our heart.

"WRECKED" BY CHRIST

Many of us can testify that we have been "wrecked" by Christ. On the one hand, Christ rescues us; but on the other hand, He "wrecks" us and makes us useless for anything other than Himself and the church life. The more we take Christ as our person, the more He "wrecks" us. Actually, this ministry is a "wrecking" ministry. Through it, thousands have been "wrecked" for Christ and the church. Now nothing other than the living Christ and the proper church life can satisfy us.

WARMED AND SOFTENED

Along with the nourishing we have the cherishing. To be cherished is to be softened by being warmed. When we are hard and cold, we need Christ to cherish us. We need Him to warm our hearts. After some experiences of His warming, we are softened. Many can testify that through their contact with the church...they have been warmed and softened. Before coming into the church life, they were somewhat cold and hard. But Christ, the nourishing and cherishing One, has made them warm and soft. Many of us can give testimony of what it is to be cherished by Christ in such a tender, intimate way.

Just as a mother cherishes a child by holding the child to her breast, so the Lord cherishes us by holding us close to Him. Although I am an elderly person, I still need Christ's cherishing. Sometimes I tell Him, "Lord, You know how small I am." He replies, "Yes, I know. This is why I am here not only to sanctify, cleanse, and nourish you, but also to cherish you." How tender, sweet, and warm the Lord Jesus is! By resting on Him, we who once were hard and cold become soft and warm. Such a change takes place

through the Lord's care for us from within. Inwardly the Lord warms us and softens us as we enjoy His tenderness, sweetness, and lovingness. Praise Him, He is the cherishing One! May we all take Christ as our person and experience more of His sanctifying, cleansing, nourishing, and cherishing. In this way we enjoy Him and experience Him in a living way.

References:

Life-Study of Ephesians msg. 55 & 56