

WHAT CHRIST SAYS TO THE CHURCHES

Revelation 2:1-3:22

Key Verses: 2:4-5a; 3:20

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”

“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.”

Thus far we have studied chapters 1-3 of Revelation, which portrayed the glorified Christ and includes his messages to seven churches. Christ spoke clearly and directly to real churches in real places in real time. These messages also apply to all churches of all time. They are also the basis for understanding and properly interpreting the rest of the book of Revelation.

Until now, we have studied each individual church. Today we want to step back and see Christ and all seven churches as a whole. We will review who Christ is, how Christ sees the church, and what Christ says to his church. How Christians see the church is important. How those outside the church see it is also important. But far more important is how Christ sees his church and what he says to it, because Christ is the founder, head and judge of the church. So, let's listen to what Christ says to his church.

First, who Christ is. In chapter 1 John saw the vision of the glorified Christ. He appeared so differently than John had seen him before. When Christ was on earth, John was so comfortable with him that he leaned his head on Christ's bosom. But before the glorified Christ, who was awesome and transcendent, John fell down as though dead. Then Christ commanded him to write down and send to the seven churches what he had seen, what was then, and what would take place later (1:19). In these letters, Christ revealed himself to each church in a unique way. We can see that Christ knew each church well--their struggles, their city and the environment they lived in, and their political and economic situations. Moreover, Christ knew their spiritual condition.

Christ begins each letter: “These are the words of him...” followed by a unique revelation of himself. Who is Christ? To the church in Ephesus, Christ was

“...him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1b). Christ knew that the influence of the Ephesian church was great; it was the mother church. They were probably concerned about the other churches. But Christ was concerned about them. Christ wanted them to know that he is among the churches, walking with them, nourishing them, protecting and guiding them as the head of the church. All the Ephesian church needed to do was restore their first love for him and trust his guidance.

To the church in Smyrna, Christ was “...him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (8b). Christ understood that this church was afflicted, poor and undergoing severe persecution. He wanted them to know that he is the eternal and infinite God, and that he is the living God who has authority to give life. Knowing this Christ strengthened them to persevere through trials and persecution. To the church in Pergamum, Christ was “...him who has the sharp, double-edged sword” (2:12). This sword represents the power of Christ’s word to judge and purify his church. Pergamum was a center for worshiping the emperor, as well as four of the greatest Roman and Greek gods. Satan’s power was very strong in that city. But Christ is more powerful than Satan. Christ’s word, like a sharp, double-edged sword, could judge and destroy idols and false teachings, like those of the Nicolaitans. When they trusted in Christ’s word, they could overcome the power of Satan in their culture.

To the church in Thyatira, Christ was “...the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.” In that church, most people tolerated Jezebel, a false prophet. Outwardly, their activity was amazing; they were doing more than they did at first. But they condoned sexual immorality and idolatry. Christ, who is the Son of God, saw through their activity to the motives of their hearts, and he was about to judge them with his mighty power. Christ sees the motives of our hearts and never condones sin.

To the church in Sardis, Christ was “...him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1). The church in Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but Christ said they were dead. Who can help the dead? Let us see. In one hand, Christ holds the seven spirits of God--the Holy Spirit--and in the other hand he holds the seven stars, which are the messengers of the churches. Christ sends the Holy Spirit to inspire and empower his messengers to proclaim the gospel boldly. Through the Spirit-filled words of God, Christ brings the dead church back to life. Only Christ can

make the spiritually dead alive. The church in Sardis had to hear Christ's words and wake up. To the church in Philadelphia, Christ was "...him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (3:7). False Jews were spreading lies that Jesus was not God and not the Christ. Satan could use these lies to plant doubt which undermined the believers' faith and made them shrink back. Christ identified himself to them as "holy and true," which means that he is God, and the true Christ, who holds the key of David. Christ can open the door of salvation for people, even the Jews. The unbelieving Jews would come and fall at the believers' feet.

To the church in Laodicea, Christ was "...the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation" (14). This church was influenced by early Gnostics who taught that Christ is a created being--just one of the great teachers. This view of Christ made them degenerate spiritually until they became lukewarm. But Christ is "the Amen," the truth of God incarnate. He is trustworthy; his testimony is reliable. He is not a created being, but the Creator God. Knowing Christ truly is the foundation of the church.

As we review how Christ revealed himself to the seven churches, we find that he wants each church to know him more fully. Like the Apostle John, we tend to lay our head on his bosom as the incarnate God. He is our Friend, Good Shepherd, Healer, Comforter, Encourager, Protector and Provider. Christ is all of these to us. But Christ is more. Christ is the Creator God, the Sovereign Ruler, and the Judge. Many people see Christ merely as the one who meets their needs. They do not know Christ fully. That is why they tend to be casual, comfortable and complacent with Jesus, and not to worship, serve and obey him with reverence. Let's pray that we may know the glorified Christ more deeply within us in a way that transforms our attitudes, thoughts, and actions to worship and serve him more fully.

Though Christ is the Sovereign Ruler in heaven, he walks among his churches and is present with them through his Spirit. He knows and dwells among each church intimately to speak the truth in love. Indeed, he is everything to each church. The church does well to listen to Christ.

Second, how Christ sees his church. Christ's evaluation of his church is quite different from that of people. Christ sees each church as it truly is. He is not impressed by a large congregation, the latest technology, and spectacular activities.

At the same time, he does not overlook sincere believers, even though their number is small, and they are poor and weak. Let's consider on what basis Christ sees his churches.

First of all, Christ sees his churches based on their spiritual condition. The church in Smyrna was poor materially. But Christ said, "you are rich!" (2:9) On the other hand, the church in Laodicea was wealthy materially. But Christ said, "you are poor" (3:17b). The church at Sardis had a reputation for being alive. But Christ said, "you are dead" (3:1b). The church at Thyatira looked impressive outwardly in their love, faith, service, and perseverance. But Christ searched their minds and hearts. He saw that their motive was not right because they tolerated false teachings and condoned sin. In pleasing Christ, a church's spiritual condition is vital.

Secondly, Christ sees his churches based on the quality of their faith. To Christ, the number of members does not matter. What really matters is to keep his word, holding onto gospel truth. Suffering was inevitable for those who lived a godly life in those pagan cultures (2Ti 3:12). When the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia kept their faith, they were persecuted. Christ commended them and encouraged them to persevere. In contrast, the church in Laodicea compromised with the corrupted culture to avoid persecution. They thought they were okay, but Christ said to them: "You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." In Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis, there were divisions between faithful believers and those who compromised. In Thyatira and Sardis, a majority of members had compromised their faith, while only a few people had not defiled themselves. These few people might have been treated like outcasts and criticized by the majority. But Christ commended them and blessed them. In pleasing Christ, we must keep gospel faith without compromise, no matter what.

Third, what Christ says to the churches. After revealing himself and how he sees them to each church, Christ gave a specific message to each church. There are four basic elements: commendation, rebuke, counsel, reward.

- Commendation. Commendation is a kind of praise. Some churches think that they don't need commendation. They are like students who don't want to receive a report card. Like or not, Jesus will evaluate each church. No commendation leaves only rebuke and punishment. So, we should know what pleases Christ and how to

be commended. Christ commended the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Philadelphia, and a few people in Sardis.

The church in Ephesus was commended for their hard work, perseverance, intolerance of wicked people, discernment, and hating the practices of the Nicolaitans. The church in Smyrna was commended for being spiritually rich because they willingly suffered for his name. The church in Pergamum was commended for remaining true to Christ's name, even though Satan's stronghold was in their city. The church in Thyatira was commended for their love, faith, service, perseverance and doing more than they did at first. The church in Sardis was not commended on the whole, but a few people who did not defile their faith were recognized and blessed. The church in Philadelphia was commended for keeping Christ's word, not denying his name and enduring persecution patiently. Only the church in Laodicea received no commendation.

When we analyze the commendations, we find key factors: keeping pure faith in Christ, not denying his name, perseverance in suffering, not compromising with false teaching, love, hard work and service for Christ. In summary, we can say that Christ is pleased with a church that keeps faith in him, without compromise. This naturally leads to persecution. But the church endures patiently to be faithful to Christ. This is the church that will be commended by Christ.

- **Rebuke.** No one likes to be rebuked. Actually, most people hate to be rebuked. But we should know that rebuke is an expression of Christ's love. He said, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (3:9a).

The church in Ephesus was rebuked for forsaking their first love. Some people at the church in Pergamum were rebuked for compromising with the Nicolaitans who promoted idolatry and sexual immorality. The church at Thyatira was rebuked for tolerating a false prophet Jezebel who was misleading God's people into sexual immorality and idolatry. The church in Sardis was rebuked for enjoying a fake reputation of being alive when they were dead. The church in Laodicea was rebuked for having a nauseating, lukewarm, hypocritical attitude. The churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia were not rebuked.

As we analyze Jesus' rebukes, we find a trend of degeneration in the churches. The beginning point is forsaking first love. This is followed by compromise

with false teachings that condone sin in the corrupted culture. Then the church was overpowered by sin until it became dead. Ultimately Christ was no longer present in the church. This helps us understand why Christ's rebukes are so serious. Christ's rebukes are usually followed by a call to repent and a warning. The word "repent" is repeated seven times in the letters (2:5[2],16, 21,22; 3:3,19). The five churches which were rebuked were also told to repent. When Christ rebukes, repentance is not optional, but required to restore our relationship with him and revive us. Many churches hope for a spiritual revival, but without repentance there is no revival. Historically, movements such as the Great Awakenings in America and the revivals in Wales and Pyongyang, Korea started with sincere repentance. Repentance always brings good fruit. On the other hand, refusal to repent always results in serious consequences. We do well to take Christ's rebuke to heart and repent for our own wellbeing and the revival of our church.

- Counsel. Isaiah described Christ as a Wonderful Counselor who had the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, and counsel (Isa 9:6; 11:2). Christ's words of counsel are a treasure for the church. Christ counseled each church as follows: To Ephesus: "Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (2:5a). To Smyrna: "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer...Be faithful, even to the point of death..." (2:10). To Pergamum he gave the Old Testament illustration of Balaam to help them understand their problem. To Thyatira, he explained why Jezebel was such a dangerous influence. To Sardis: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die...Remember...what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent" (3:2-3a). To Philadelphia: "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown" (3:11).

Christ's counsel to the worst church, Laodicea, is amazing. Christ taught them that they were deceived by their wealth, saying: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (3:17). Out of great love for them, Jesus urges: "buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see" (3:18). In this way, Christ preached the gospel to them using a context they could understand. As we consider Christ's counsel, we realize that though he is the Creator God, Judge and Sovereign Ruler, he humbly counsels his churches like a father to his wayward children. This reveals his love, a love that is unconditional, patient, unfailing and never ending.

- Reward. Christ's reward is given to those who are victorious. The words, "To the one who is victorious" are spoken to each church (2:7, 11,17,26;3:5,12, 21). The word "victorious" comes from the Greek word "nikao," which means "conquer" or "overcome." Christ's reward is given to those who overcome hardship and persecution and conquer the world that is hostile to Christ. In fact, Christ's reward is the fruit of our Christian life. What is Christ's reward? Christ says: "I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7b); "I will give you life as your victor's crown" (2:10b); "the one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death" (2:11b); "I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it" (2:17b); "I will give authority over the nations" (2:26); "I will also give that one the morning star" (2:28); "The one who is victorious will, like them, 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" (3:5); "I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem...and I will also write on them my new name" (3:12); "I will give the right to sit with me on my throne" (3:21a). When we analyze Christ's rewards, they can be summarized as eternal life and the privilege to reign with Christ in his kingdom and enjoy God forever, participating in the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:9). Christ's reward is given only to those who are victorious. How can we obtain this victory? It is only by faith in Jesus (1Jn 5:4).

As we conclude this study, let's consider what Christ has said to us. Christ said, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (2:4-5a). He has also told us not to compromise with corrupt culture, to wake up from spiritual slumber and strengthen what remains. He has also called us to repent of a lukewarm spirit, and to seek him humbly, recognizing our need. It has not been easy to hear some of the things Christ says to his church. Yet he has also assured us that he knows all our hard work and sufferings for him. He has shown us the way of victory by faith. And he has promised so many rewards that are glorious beyond our imagination. At this moment, let's remember his most gracious invitation: "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" (3:20). Let's open the doors of our hearts to Christ to come in and have fellowship with us. Let's pray to restore our first love for him and to be a church that pleases him.