

## **Introduction**

One of the many positive aspects of the Book of Revelation that we were reminded of in Carol's lecture last week is that this is a relevant book. It was relevant when it was written around 2000 years ago, and it is still relevant to us today. We will see tonight exactly how relevant in these next two lessons where Jesus speaks personally to seven Christian congregations of the first century church. **MAP**

All of them were located in western Turkey: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, an area where Paul and his disciples had actively ministered. The fact that there are seven churches is a symbol of completeness, enabling Jesus to say everything He needed to say to every church and every individual believer in every generation until He comes again.

He began each of his seven letters with one or more key descriptions of Himself, with each description tailored specifically for the situation that He was about to address. Each church had an angel or overseer assigned to it to make sure the scrolls were safely delivered as written. Although addressed to congregations, the promises are for "him who overcomes", and such, they must be applied by individuals with an ear to hear, a determination to heed the warning and to take hold of the promise. The church has the responsibility to get out the message to the believers, but it is each individual who must take the message to heart and heed the warnings.

### **Verses 1-7: Ephesus**

Jesus' first message was to the church in Ephesus. We know about Ephesus because of Paul's letter written many years earlier. Ephesus was world-famous as a religious, cultural, and economic center of the region. Paul had ministered there for three years, and according to historical traditions, the apostle John himself ministered there after Paul's death as one of the elders.

Ephesus had a busy harbor, paved streets, theaters, public baths and many temples. Many citizens of Ephesus trafficked in magic, witchcraft and demonic activities. Books containing formulas for sorcery and other forbidden arts were plentiful in Ephesus. The Greeks had built the largest temple, known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world which housed an image of the goddess Diana, a fertility goddess who was worshipped with immoral sex.

## Chart

Verse 1: *"These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands."* Here, we see Jesus' unique ability to hold in his right hand, the hand of power and rule, all seven stars. This shows that He had complete authority over all of the angels who exist to carry out His will. Then notice where He walks; among the seven lampstands, or among the churches. We see Him here patrolling the grounds where believers gather; He notices the needs as soon as they crop up and is immediately available to respond. He knows them intimately as we saw in verse 2: *"I know your deeds,"*

Jesus first addresses the religious activity of this congregation; He had full knowledge of their work, their effort and the motives behind all their good deeds within the body of Christ and the community. The Ephesian church also pursued doctrinal purity and showed a godly perseverance. He knew that they were discerning and did not tolerate wickedness. By all outward appearances, this was a solid church that worked hard, had great outreach, protected the integrity of the gospel and had not become weary in well-doing.

So what was the problem? Despite all the good in the Ephesian church, there was something seriously wrong. *Jesus said, "I hold this against you: You have forsaken first love"*

I resent this! You've lost your passion.....for Me! Their love for Christ had waned so slowly that they had not even noticed that it was gone! This is one of the easiest things for a Christian to do. Just like it takes constant attention to keep your marriage from growing stale, so too does our relationship with Christ become

humdrum and subtly cool over time. And unless we study a lesson like this, we don't realize what has taken place because we are so busy doing good stuff for God! Trouble is, as Gene reminded us last weekend, often I'm running the wrong race! Our busy-ness with our good works, our effort at meeting the needs of others, even our Bible study here can mask our lack of attentiveness to our one-on-one personal relationship with Christ. And if you and I are not in love with Jesus Christ, everything else we do is simply empty and vain. A heart grown cold toward Christ is a heart in serious trouble. Jesus called it sin and He demanded immediate repentance in verse 5. *Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.* This is *not* a command to feel bad about ourselves; it's a command to do something: an urgent appeal for first all the recognition and then an instant change of attitude and conduct.... or else the lampstand, the very symbol for our identity, would be removed from our midst.

Many congregations have lost their first love; you can see it in Europe where cathedrals which once hummed with activity are now mere sightseeing stops for tourists. You can see it here in the US, where Episcopal Churches are in court over who owns the church property after a split over the ordination of homosexual priests and bishops. The lampstand is missing and entire denominations are being shut down because they have left their first love. Many others have fallen out of love with Jesus and fallen in love with social programs or environmental concerns.

Even in the evangelical denominations, Satan has done a masterful job in creating a sense of need for new programs to encourage our walk of faith. Do you remember *Experiencing God? Purpose-Driven Lives? Now, One Month to Live?* Sometimes in our enthusiasm embrace the program, we forget the basics that taught us to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. What are those basics? Prayer, reading and studying the Scriptures, and deeds that give us an opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus to a lost world. Even as we embrace new opportunities to be relevant to today's generation, we must work hard to retain the passion we had at the height of our initial walk with Jesus, so that we don't face the same danger as did the church of Ephesus. Christ's warning is as clear for us as it was for them: You change or I will depart. If Jesus departs from our midst, all effort is surely in vain.

Then, as if He recognized the need for a morsel of encouragement, He ended with this, "You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, (Nik oh lay un tuns) which I also hate". Within the Ephesian community, there was a group of people originating with a man named Nicolaos. (Nik uh lay us) who was leading the Christian community to sin in the areas of idolatry and sexual immorality. The Nicolaitans had also infiltrated the church in Pergamum, but the Ephesian believers had stopped them cold, despite their popularity in the community. Jesus had confidence that the Ephesians would stand firm; He said, *"To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God."*

Here is the first mention of the *Tree of Life* since the book of Genesis. In the middle of the Garden of Eden were both the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve were able to eat of any tree except one, which would have included this Tree of Life in the middle of the garden. (Speculate what they would have gained from eating from the Tree of Life)

But they overlooked that fruit, and instead were attracted to that which was forbidden. When they were cast from the Garden after they sinned, an angel with a flashing sword was assigned to guard the tree of life so that no one could return to eat of it. In fact, no one will eat of it until the new world is established in Revelation chapter 22, where the saints will once again be able to partake in its fruit and thereby enjoy eternal life. (Now that's a fruit I want to taste!)

### **Verses 8-11: the Church in Smyrna**

"These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last; who died and came to life again."

The members at Smyrna were poverty-stricken people. Yet, Christ said they were rich, which they were, spiritually that is. The church of Smyrna had not forsaken their first love, but they were suffering economically for Jesus in a hostile community as Jewish merchants refused to deal with them because of their bold witness for Jesus in the marketplace. Christ's title to them as the One "who died and came to life again" was

specifically chosen to encourage these martyrs who would soon suffer persecution for His sake at the hands of a group of Jews who thought they were the people of God but were, as Jesus noted, of the Synagogue of Satan. They were actually the representatives of their father the devil, just as Jesus had told them they were when they argued with Him over His authority in John's Gospel, chapter 8. The Smyrnans who were faithful even to the point of death, could look forward to receiving the "crown of life". The crown here is the victory wreath or trophy awarded to the winner of the games.

In addition, they will not be hurt by "the second death", but would be resurrected to eternal life. Revelation chapter 21 identifies the second death as the lake of fire, or eternal death. This death has no power over the faithful followers of Christ. We are all aware that Christian believers throughout the world are being persecuted for their faith today in larger numbers than ever before in the history of the church. They too can look forward to receiving the crown of life. We Americans know little of such persecution, although we are sometimes frustrated with verbal attacks when we take strong stands for our faith. But I believe that the remnant of authentic believers in our own country will come under more stress and suffering because of our spiritual and moral stand against many of the current social issues that our government would call good and we would call evil in the sight of God. Political correctness is the watchword of the day rather than truth and righteousness as defined by Jesus Christ. As our society continues its current downward spiral into a moral and spiritual freefall, we will do well to take these words of Jesus to heart as He taught them on the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." It has always been an honor and a privilege to suffer for His name's sake and I am grateful that we have the promises of Jesus to the believers at Smyrna to encourage us if and when we come to that in our lifetime.

### **Verses 12-17: The Church in Pergamum**

As the church of Smyrna was encouraged to remain faithful to Jesus Christ in their time of persecution, the church of Pergamum was encouraged to remain faithful to him in their time of temptation. Pergamum was a prosperous Roman city that derived its name from the parchment trade that prospered there. The worship of Caesar Domitian as the divine emperor became the civic policy and when the authorities demanded that the title of "Lord" be given to Caesar instead of to Jesus Christ, the Christian community was threatened. The people at Pergamum had a habit of honoring heretics and false teachings; however the church managed to nullify this with their knowledge of Word of God. Jesus' salutation, *"These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double edged sword"*, was specifically suited for the situation of this church who needed to fight heresy.

Christ commended these believers for their courage and perseverance in a hostile environment that had recently resulted in the violent death of one of their own, a man named Antipas. He must have been a good witness for Christ, since the Lord Himself called Antipas, *faithful*. Yet the church at Pergamum continued to stand firm even though the idol and emperor worship that took place at Pergamum spoke loud and clear of Satan's dominion there.

*"I know where you live---where Satan has his throne."* To have a group of Christians declare Jesus as Lord was a political threat of disloyalty to the government, *"Yet you remain true to my name."* This small group of Christians held firm to the truth that Jesus is the only Lord. Nevertheless, Jesus had a saw a weakness in their moral fiber.

*"You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans."*

First, "the teaching of Balaam" indicated sexual sin in their midst. From our study last year in Numbers, we read a story that took place when Moses had led God's people through the wilderness and had finally arrived on the plains of Moab overlooking the Promised Land. The king of Moab hired a false prophet named Balaam to use Moabite

girls to entice the young Jewish men to take part in their idolatrous and immoral feasts. The king thought that God would then become angry with His own people and destroy them Himself, so that the king of Moab would not have to risk life and limb to stop them from invading his land. That plan worked, because as Israelite men joined Moabite women in worshipping the false god of the Moabites, the Lord's anger burned against them.

Since that day, the teaching of Balaam has symbolized the kind of evil that seduces the people of God into immorality and idolatry. And here, centuries later, some Christians within the church of Pergamum were compromising their faith by indulging in idol worship and sexual sin. That, added to the seduction of the Nicolaitans, who declared that they were free from the Law, resulted in many people in the church participating in activities that were serious deviations from the moral truths of the Word of God. The church authorities should have dealt with these problems, but instead had not only tolerated them, but sometimes condoned them.

The modern church is being assaulted with so many moral and ethical issues that many of today's spiritual leaders are doing the same. They find it easier to compromise the truth in the name of political correctness, or they want to attract new members among the current generation of people for whom truth is relative. In their zeal to offend no one, they are offending the King of Kings.

Abortion? Not that big of a deal any more, is it?

Couples living together without being married? Don't be judgmental!

Movies with nudity or bad language? Well, you just can't avoid it anymore!

Golf or other sports on Sundays instead of time spent at church?

Don't be legalistic!

Yes, then as now, church members were engaging in rebellion against the Scriptures in the areas of sexual immorality and idolatry. We are surrounded by heresies and humanistic thinking even within our churches. We need the sword of the Spirit, the

Word of God to help us tell truth from error. If the church of Pergamum would not listen to the sword of the mouth of the Lord, then that same sword would be used to bring judgment against the church.

*“Repent! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight with the sword of my mouth.”* But then, look at the promise to him who overcomes:

*“I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”*

We learned about manna in the Book of Exodus. Manna was the food God placed on the ground each morning for the Jews to eat while they were in the wilderness. Manna is a picture of Christ himself who is the bread of life, the bread from heaven. Christ is the one who will satisfy our spiritual hunger and those who need the sustenance of the Bread of Life will receive it directly from the hand of God.

A white stone was used in the ancient world as a token from a host for guests to enter a special feast, or a ruler would give one to the poor so they could get a regular supply of corn. At times the white stone was given to the victor in the games, and may spiritually be seen as a symbol that entitles the victor to the Messianic banquet. The Christian may be rejected on earth because of a strong moral stand on an issue relevant to our culture, but that same Christian will be accepted in heaven. If you love our Lord Jesus, and you stand firm in the face of temptation, you will one day receive a white stone on which is written a new name and it will be your assurance that Jesus has invited you to the great wedding banquet in heaven.

#### Verses 18-29: the Church at Thyatira

*These are the words of the Son of God whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*

These were familiar terms to the metal workers of Thyatira. The city was known for the brass armor made there as well as many other commercial trade guilds. Commercial prosperity attracted many Jewish businessmen and their families, and in

time some of them converted to Christianity. Membership in a trade guild involved periodic feasts at which the members ate meat offered to idols and participated in sexual orgies. Today, membership in many unions, (teacher's union comes to mind) requires the financial support of causes that are often against the will of God. The church had resisted that particular social pull, and had instead grown in their faith and deeds for the sake of the Gospel. Yet the Lord, knowing them intimately as He does all His people, attacked the source of the problem at Thyatira. This church was allowing a Jezebel in their midst, to teach them and to entice them to commit sexual immorality. It was as if they had their own Dr. Ruth encouraging them to take advantage of their freedom to sin, and be free from guilt!

Many of you are familiar with the story of the prophet Elijah, King Ahab, and his pagan wife Jezebel, who lived in northern Israel around the latter part of the ninth century B.C. Jezebel ranks as the most evil women in the Bible and symbolizes people who entice others to enter into idolatry and all the sexual immorality connected with their sacred rites.

The Jezebel in the church of Thyatira was encouraging the Christians to become involved in the life of the trade guilds and their various unholy activities of sexual immorality and idolatry, and the elders of Thyatira were tolerating this self-appointed false prophetess and her teachings. She may have taught that one could believe in Jesus as one god among many, a popular stand today. Jesus warned that He was going to place Jezebel, who had lain on a bed of sexual pleasure, on her own bed of physical and emotional suffering. Then He told her followers that He would strike dead her spiritual children who were spreading her deadly theology within the church. Fortunately, Jesus had something positive to say to the godly remnant of believers within this church who chose not to follow the teachings of this Jezebel.

*“Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations.....I will also give him the morning star.”*

This is a reference to Christ setting up his kingdom on earth during His thousand-year reign. The rule with the iron scepter, taken from Psalm 2 also refers to the breakup of all the great world powers at the time of His second coming. The faithful believers will rule the nations with Jesus. We will have a place of privilege as well as responsibility. This will all occur during the millennial kingdom before the coming of the new heavens and the new earth.

In 1 Peter 1:19 and Revelation 22:16, Jesus is called the Morning Star. The morning star is the one that appears just before the dawn, when the night is the darkest. The ministry of Jesus, as prophesied by Isaiah, would bring the light of truth to a world that was walking in great darkness. Those within the church of Thyatira who had rejected Jezebel and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets would receive Christ himself, the STAR, as their reward.

Jesus issued a call for holiness to the church of Thyatira and still today, He calls his people to be holy in character, separated from the world and given into His hands for His purpose and glory. He calls us to a holiness resembling His own. What a privilege it is to be holy when everything around us calls for compromise in wickedness.

Chapter 2 concludes with this reminder: *He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Well, what does the Spirit say?*

- Each letter began with a description of Jesus that was specifically appropriate for that congregation. Think of the names of Jesus that you most appreciate; chances are that those names are the ones that specifically minister to you.
- Each letter showed that Jesus was intimately aware of their strengths and their weaknesses.
- Each letter gave them a word of correction or encouragement.
- And each one promised of a reward for their faithfulness.

Jesus was then and is today in the midst of our church and in the midst of our lives; He sees the race that we are running. He has allowed His church in many parts of the world to experience intense suffering for the sake of His Name, and yet the gates of

hell are not prevailing against it, despite of how desperate it may soon appear to us. Throughout the world, governments, and perhaps soon, even our own will attempt to force Christians into silence against immorality. How are we to react? Remember that we are the lampstand that holds up the Light of the world with the gospel of redemption.

The promises that Jesus holds out to us are only for those who overcome wickedness and stand firm for the name of Jesus. During times of suffering and temptation, which are sure to come, we are called to remain faithful to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, and He will give us fruit from the tree of life, the crown of life, hidden manna, a white stone bearing our new name, authority over the nations, and the morning star.

What more could we possibly need? And the reality is that it is already ours!