

I Know Your Deeds
Revelation 3 Lesson 14
by Dellen Ludwig

I really enjoyed Cheri Bean's lecture last week as she taught about the first four letters written by John in the book of Revelation. These letters of commendation and conviction, encourage and challenge us even today. Our study this week will cover the final three churches of that seven who had been addressed in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation.

Before we examine these last three churches, I would like to present an historical perspective seen in their interpretation. Then, as postal carriers, we can dust off our satchels and begin the final leg of our journey to deliver the letters to the cities of Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Chuck Smith, a pastor of Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, presented a perspective on the seven churches of Revelation chapters two and three which examined them as examples of how the church has changed in different periods of history.

Ephesus represented the beginning church with persecution of new Christians by the Jews and later, the Roman government.

Smyrna represented the church of the second and third century that underwent terrible persecution by the Roman government, killing millions.

Pergamos represented the development of the church-state under Emperor Constantine including compromise to unify pagan and religious celebrations.

Thyatira represented the introduction of religious icons to encourage the worship of the saints in the Catholic church.

Sardis represented the introduction of the Protestant Reformation which began a return to the individual relationship to God rather than the tradition of the institution of the church.

Philadelphia represented the faithful remnant who began to wake up to the need of reaching out to spread the gospel while the majority slept.

And finally, the church of Laodicea represented the church of mediocrity who deluded themselves into not recognizing their desperate need of God.

Now, let's take a more in-depth look at the last three churches to whom Jesus, through His disciple John, addressed the letters found in chapter three of Revelation. As in the first four letters, Jesus introduced Himself with a different picture of His character in each letter. He

commented about their deeds or works, and then corrected, encouraged and challenged each church to persist in their faith.

Sardis was found, as all of these churches were, along the Roman road which had become a high-traffic trade route. Sardis was famous for two main products: wool and metal. Nestled along the Pactolus River, the flocks of Sardis were developed to produce a strikingly black wool. Using dye in different colors, they offered fabric and carpets that were highly valued. Gold was discovered early in their history and the early rulers of Sardis were the first to mint gold coins. “Electrum” was fabricated also, which was a type of bronze.

Sardis, being a merchant city was challenged by “Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars,” as having, “a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” [Rev. 3:1] Unlike Ephesus and Thyatira, Sardis had no heresies to correct. They had no persecutions to endure, like Smyrna. MacLaren stated in his commentary: “Neither weeds nor flowers grow in winter.” Sardis was in a state of deep freeze.

Unlike the early church, who ”turned the world upside down” by sharing the gospel wherever they went, the group of believers in Sardis were just too busy with their businesses, as a general rule, to spend time on their relationship with the Lord.

Historically, before the Protestant Revolution, people lived their lives keeping a separation between their livelihood and their faith. The “professional” leaders of the church told the people what they should do and believe. The people didn’t need to even try on their own. Everyone presumed that everyone went to church on Sunday, but there was very little difference between the pagan and the pious otherwise.

For many years in America, everyone was expected to go to church on Sunday too. Stores were closed and workers stayed home to spend the “Lord’s Day” at church services and with their families. However, down through the ages many have drifted into the belief that their faith was for Sunday only, and the six other days of the week were for work. Faith was a personal, hidden thing.

Today, we can even watch church services remotely on our TVs, and then go off for the rest of the day to do whatever we want or to “get ahead” with our work. We use our Sunday to seek our choice of entertainment, never darkening the door of a building labeled as a church. Like the church in Sardis, our hearts grow cold because of this isolation and we appear dead, because there is no evidence of good works to show that there is life.

James chapter 2 verse 26 challenged the early believers to their need to interact with good works in their lives. “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Likewise, Christ challenged the believers in Sardis: “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.” [Revelation 3:2,3]

This “coming suddenly” was not primarily referring to Christ’s sudden return in the rapture, but rather to how each believer will meet Him when they die. Jesus told a parable about the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21. In this story a man had wonderful harvests and decided that he would tear down his old barns and build bigger ones to store all of his produce.

Then he said, “And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of gain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’”
[Luke 12:19-21]

The first lesson we learn from this letter to Sardis is that God’s plan for our lives is not to just work for ourselves so we can then “eat, drink and be merry”, but rather that we do good works for Him.

In Ephesians 2:8&9 Paul explained it in these words. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – this is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

But there were a few people in Sardis who incorporated their faith into their daily lives by living for Jesus. In verse 4 they were described in this way. “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.” [Rev. 3:4]

Contrary to those who seemed “dead” in this church, there were a few who stood out because they had not compromised their faith. They were not foolishly devoting all of their lives in the pursuit of wealth, but were seeking to do the “good works” God had planned for them to do. They remembered what they had been taught and held on to it.

There is always hope for any who will “wake up” to God’s Spirit in their life. Verse 5 challenges all of the church: “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.” [Rev. 3:5]

Remember that there are two books mentioned in Revelation, the book of life and the Lamb’s book of life. Revelation 20 speaks of the books that are opened at the Great White Throne Judgment. In verse 12 it says, “Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.” [Rev. 20:12]

The Lamb’s book of life is spoken of in Revelation 21:27 where believers are coming to live in the New Jerusalem on the New Earth. “Nothing impure will ever enter it, not will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” [Rev. 21:27]

Therefore, the Lord is not speaking of believers losing their salvation here in chapter 3. Rather Jesus Christ is warning Christians who are not living their lives as a demonstration of their faith, that their lives are short. We do not know how many days we have on this earth. At any time, like the foolish farmer, the Lord may call us to step into eternity, ending the list of our deeds in the book of life.

Only while on the earth do we have a chance to live for Christ and have the opportunity to share the gospel with others. That is why Jesus shouts, “Wake up!” to this church. Christ wants all believers to live victoriously for Him. So, again, He challenges the faithful in Sardis to hear what He has to say to the churches, while they may do so!

The next church, Philadelphia, was in the Aegean region of Turkey situated about 30 miles from Sardis at the foot of Mt. Tmolus. This church was in a topographic region which was very fertile, great for growing grapevines, but quite prone to volcanic activity and earthquakes. Christ addresses Himself as “him who is holy and true, who holds the keys of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” [Rev. 3:7]

Christ’s character of holiness and truth emphasizes that there is no compromise in Him. The word holy means “set apart” or “consecrated.” And the Lord challenged Philadelphia saying, “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” [Rev. 3:8]

Historically, as the people of the church realized that they had personal accountability to do good deeds, they began to reach out to the world with good deeds, such as social benefits,

building hospitals or schools and sending out missionaries. Individuals sought also to leave their home lands to live in other cultures so that they could live as life-style evangelists.

They saw the “open doors” Christ offered, and with the important trade route available to them by means of the Imperial Post Road, they used it to reach people who had never heard the gospel. Even men and women of very little means stepped through those doors and traveled into the poorest of regions such as Africa, India and China.

We today are blessed with free access to the Scriptures, we read in them how the Lord challenged His believers from the very beginning of their faith to “Go and make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [Matthew 28:18,20]

The Lord’s call of spreading the gospel continues today all over the world. But there is opposition to that call. In verse 9 the Lord addressed the opposition in Philadelphia. “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.” [Rev. 3:9]

As God’s Word pierces the darkness of people who have never heard it before, bringing the light of salvation, you know Satan will oppose it. In the early history of the gospel coming to areas like Philadelphia, it was the Jews who fought its spread. Today it is often militant Islam that is opposing the spread of the gospel.

Mission organizations such as The Voice of the Martyrs document how those who call themselves “the faithful” to Islam are today attacking and murdering preachers of the gospel in areas such as Indonesia, the Middle East and African countries in an attempt to stop conversion to Christianity. But they also record how faithful individuals of the church in these lands “patiently endure” being cast out of their homes and being persecuted for their faith. Many never forsake their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ even during such persecution.

Throughout the history of the church, there are those who claim to know the truth, but have denied Jesus, Who is the Truth. One day, each one will face Jesus the Holy Judge, as He examines that book of life. Then they will recognize that He, the one whom they persecuted by killing Christians, is the very Judge they must face for their deeds.

The Lord “who is holy and true” encouraged individuals of faith with these words: “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.” [Rev. 3:10]

When our Lord comes next He will gather His faithful. He will take us home to be with Him forever. 1 Thessalonians 15:13-17 talks about when Jesus comes again. In verse 17 He promises, “After that we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” [1Thess. 4:17]

After the rapture of the church, the Lord warns about that “trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.” (Rev. 3:10) In fact Jesus challenged those who are persecuted, “I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. The one who is victorious 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, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.” [Rev. 3:11,12]

At His Second Coming, those who have withstood the persecution will be rewarded and honored by becoming a strong pillar in the temple of God.

Even those of us with “little strength”, as we hold on to the faith we have, Christ promises to honor in the actual Temple of the New Jerusalem. But even above this honor, he promises, “I will also write on them my new name.” (verse 14)

Today, we may engrave a name and date on an item to commemorate an accomplishment or special event. Jesus Christ cherishes us! He is writing His name on us; His new name. We are His and He desires to let everyone know that we are His – even by writing His new, eternal name on us, His faithful ones.

This wonderful promise is given to encourage saints who face persecution and stand faithful to the Lord. They are those who have used their ears to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” They are victorious in Christ’s strength to win the victor’s crown.

Our final stop in our route to deliver the letter to the seventh church, brings us to the church of Laodicea. This church was found in the Lycus River Valley, on a prosperous trade route, near Colossae. It was well known for its three marbled theaters and aqueduct system to water the rich fertile land around it. Laodicean merchants did very good business in banking, clothing and manufacturing. They even had a medical school.

Jesus Christ addresses this wealthy church with the “words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” [Rev. 3:14] It is fitting that He stresses this part of His character for the church of Laodicea. When Jesus was teaching, He often introduced His vital lessons with the words, “Verily, verily”, or “Truly, truly I say to you...” Amen can also be translated in modern English as “so be it.”

Christ’s character qualities of being the faithful and the true witness are important as He confronts the church of Laodicea because of their deeds: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” [Revelation 3:16]

Looking at the idea of these seven churches being examples of the history of the church, this church parallels our present age. The church today, in our country is very wealthy and increasingly apathetic to our world. We all have housing, education, food, plenty of clothing and extra possessions like cars, TVs, phones, entertainment etc. Yet we offer only a small amount to help others in need.

The church of Laodicea saw themselves as we do. “You say, I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing....” (verse 17a) When the Lord looked at the wealthy even of His day, he saw examples for warning, “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.’” [Matthew 19:23]

But it wasn’t their wealth that blocked them from Christ’s kingdom. It was that they didn’t value God’s kingdom and were delusional about their actual condition. The rest of the seventeenth verse reads: “But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor blind and naked.” (verse 17b)

How could the church be so wrong about its own state? In 2 Thessalonians 2:8-11 Paul described the coming man of lawlessness, and how Satan would use him to draw people away from the truth of the Word. In verse 10 and 11 he said, “and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.” [2 Thessalonians 2:10,11]

Jesus also predicted the time of tribulation would be full of false promises: “For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if

possible, even the elect.” [Mathew 24:24] So, delusion and believing lies are descriptors of the end times.

We as believers in this day, may be able to see the difference between the truth and the lie. We have the Word of God in print. His word is truth and He is truth. When we compare confusing things that we may value, to the Word of God, we can clear up our misconception to see the truth.

Jesus told the church, “I counsel you to 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.” [Rev.3: 18]

A fire heats and melts gold ore to such a degree that any contaminate will rise to the top to be skimmed off, leaving purified gold. Paul wrote to the church of Philippi, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” [Philippians 4:8]

James addressed the purity of religion. He said, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” [James 1:27]

Therefore, from these verses, I believe God was saying to this church that they needed to turn away from their own selfish desires, which contaminated their thoughts, and seek to see and do what Christ would do. He is the one who is faithful and true. He is the one who is pure and admirable. The Lord desires that His church spend their gold to care for orphans and widows, those in distress. When the church strives to be like our Lord, we will be rich and clothed in His righteous white robes as our reward in eternity.

However, if the church wallows in complacency and refuses to do the deeds God has mandated us to do, we face His discipline. Verses 19 and 20 challenges the church, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Behold! 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.” [Rev. 3:19,20]

As believers in Christ, we are His church. Are we deluded, not knowing Him or His Word? Do we leave Him outside of our lives, knocking for entry? This is addressed to believers – to the church of Laodicea!

One last question: are we like that church of Laodicea, only thinking about things we like or value, rather than looking for what our Lord values? He wants to be with us and have us be with Him. He wants us to participate with Him through love and good deeds to be “faithful and true” before the world, like He is.

Let's pray: Lord we are surrounded by amazing wealth as Your church in America. I fear we are often unable to see our reality, as being poor and needy and naked. Give us Your eye-slave so we can see what You see. Please come in to live with us day by day so that we can value all that You are with actual good deeds. We have ears. Please open them so that we can hear what You say to the churches. Amen – truly let it be so.”