

# Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;  
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;  
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;  
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;  
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;  
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.  
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;  
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.  
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.  
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.  
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

## **The Seven Churches**

**June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012**

**Revelation 2-3**

**Rev. Paul Carter**

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles this morning to Revelation chapter 2. For the next 4 Sundays we are going to be looking at selected passages from the Book of Revelation. Several months ago we conducted a Small Group where I taught through the Book in detail and those notes and most of the audio are available on-line on the church website. We will not be working at that depth in these morning messages and so you may find it useful to download the first sermon where an extensive introduction was given to the general pattern and framework of the book as a whole was given. In these messages we will be taking the 10,000 foot level view. We will try and acquaint you with some of the big issues and main concerns.

Let me set the table here for you just a little bit. The Apostle John is now an old man. He is the last of the 12 disciples. He is the only one who has not yet been executed for his faith. He is in exile on the prison island of Patmos. He is worshipping the Lord on the Lord's day, Sunday morning and he falls into a trance and he has a vision. This vision is in chapter 1. What he sees is a vision of the glorified Jesus walking in the very midst of the churches. He is ancient and yet timeless, he is pure and powerful and his eyes are like a flame of fire. He sees with penetrating

insight and he knows all things. His voice is like the sound of many waters and out of his mouth comes a sharp two edged sword. His face shines like the brilliance of the sun. He is walking through the lampstands which represent his church, his bride, his body upon the earth. In chapter 2 and 3 we have the record of what he saw and what Jesus said and we will look at that this morning.

Most scholars agree that we are to understand these letters in two ways simultaneously. On the one hand, these were real churches living in real places and full of real people. On the other hand these churches represent all churches in all places over the entirety of history until the return of the Lord. The fact that there are 7 is a pretty good indicator of this second level of meaning, as is the case that if you were to deliver these letters by horseback you would travel in one big circle as you did so. Thus we are to hear real counsel to real churches in the first century and we are to hear timeless counsel to all churches that exist everywhere. That means that Jesus is speaking to us just as surely as he was speaking to them.

We cannot read these two chapters straight through this morning given our time constraints. Again, the verse by verse approach is available on the website. We are taking the big picture look this morning and we are going to try and piece together what Jesus commends in a church and what Jesus rebukes because I think we will find it quite surprising. Let's make a list first of what Jesus commended in the churches that he surveyed:

## **What Jesus Commends:**

### **1. Work, labour and patience**

We see that in verse 2 of chapter 2 as Jesus affirms what he sees in the church at Ephesus. He says:

<sup>2c</sup>"I know your works, your labor, your patience, (Revelation 2:2. NKJV)

We see it again for example in 2:9

"I know your works, tribulation, and poverty... (Revelation 2:9. NKJV)

The first word *erga* means “good work” or “activity”. This is a church that is doing good things. They have good programs in the community. They are not just talking the talk, they are walking the walk and putting flesh on the Gospel and he EXPECTS TO SEE THAT! There is some nonsense out there that Christianity is all about BEING not DOING and that too much talk about DOING will cause us to become legalists or Pharisees or some other bunk. Well here we see Jesus saying that WORKS are GOOD!! The next word *kopon* means labour. It means that Jesus sees their difficulty and he notes that in their difficulty they are showing patient endurance. This makes sense in terms of how John himself described the faith in chapter 1, as the kingdom of pain and patience. Christianity is not supposed to be easy and nowhere does the Bible promise you your best life now. It promises you pain and it requires of you patience. The ideal picture of Christian living is not a person sitting on a Muskoka Chair up in cottage country reading their NIV Study Bible – only in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America could we turn Christianity – a religion based on a naked guy carrying a cross – rather the image is the image of labour, of toil and painstaking service unto death. The Apostle Paul talked about pouring his life out to the dregs in service of the Lord Jesus. A good Christian dies exhausted and hears from Jesus those blessed words: well done thou good and faithful servant.

## **2. Intolerance**

The second thing Jesus affirms in a church is a healthy dose of intolerance. Most of us are inclined to think of this as belonging in the list of what Jesus rebukes but that is because we have forgotten our Bibles. Jesus says to the church in Ephesus:

I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.

Here Jesus is affirming their intolerance towards evil doers or literally “worthless ones”. Jesus appreciates INTOLERANCE. Now obviously that has to be defined. He is not saying that he wants his churches to march around town with signs saying: “Boo Homosexuality” or “He made them Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve” or some other such nonsense. The Bible says that we are not to judge those outside the church but we ARE to judge those inside. Too many Evangelicals today get that exactly backwards. They judge those outside and permit everything

inside! Here Jesus says: “What I like about you folks is that you will not tolerate people who want to be in the church but continue in wickedness. Good for you!” Entrance in the church begins with REPENTENCE – will you say amen to that? Amen; and remaining in the church assumes DISCIPLINE.

He also affirms them for their discernment regarding their own leadership and the teaching they will sit under. We talked about this last Sunday and you will meet it a few more times as you read through Revelation. Jesus holds the church responsible to TEST the leadership she submits to, he expects his church to know their Bibles so well that they can spot a false shepherd and a false prophet and turf them out! He also commends them for hating the right heresies:

<sup>6</sup>Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Chronologically this comes after Jesus rebukes them for lacking in love which we’ll get to in a moment, but after rebuking them for a deficiency in love he commends them for being full of appropriate hate. How about that?! Understand this my friends, a good church loves well but it also hates well. It is not enough to love the good – you also have to HATE THE EVIL. I would suggest to you that the Evangelical church today needs more teaching on hate and perhaps a little less on love. We love everybody and everything now adays and we find the news that we are to hate evil to be a bit of a shocker don’t we? Did you read the FAQ on Numbers 31 last week? If you didn’t you can request a copy through the worship register, but the point is as we read our Bibles we are reminded of the need to develop a healthy hatred for sin in this place. Good churches hate what God hates and they receive commendation from Jesus for so doing.

### **3. Perseverance**

Notice the frequent occurrence of words like “patience” and “endurance” throughout the commendations of Jesus. We see it that in numerous places but perhaps we see it best in 2:13:

Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.

These folks are holding fast to the faith even though some of them have paid the ultimate price, one of these is named as Antipas, my faithful witness or as the Greek says, my faithful martyr. The word martyr comes from the Greek *martus* and it means simply “witness” but because so

many Christian witness were killed in those days, it came to mean someone whose witness for the cause led to their death, and in the case of Antipas, that was obviously the case. Perseverance in faith under trial is not just noteworthy, according to Jesus, it is distinctive of the saved person. Look at 2:26-27:

And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, **to him** I will give power over the nations—<sup>27</sup> *‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’*<sup>4E</sup>—as I also have received from My Father; (Revelation 2:26-27. NKJV)

According to Jesus, heaven is the inheritance of those who persevere until the end.

Our next bit of commendation comes from 2:19:

19 ‘I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first.

The Greek links all of these things with the connective *kai* making it very clear that 5 things are being affirmed in this church:

1. Their good works
2. Their love for God and others - *agapein*
3. Their faith
4. Their service one to another – the Greek word *diakonian* is used from which we get our “deacon”.
5. Their patient endurance.

The first and the last of these we have already mentioned so we will focus now on the three in the middle.

#### **4. Love (for God and others)**

For the Apostle John, who received this vision and who served as the overseer of the churches to whom it was directed, the love of God and the love of one’s brother or sister Christian were inextricably bound up in one another. He says in 1 John:

<sup>7</sup>But **if we walk in the light** as He is in the light, **we have fellowship with one another**, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:7. NKJV)

So John says that it is inconceivable to him that you could be in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and not be in a relationship with the church, the gathered body of Christ. The two go together. Then he says:

<sup>14</sup>We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love <sup>h</sup>his brother abides in death.

<sup>15</sup>Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3:14-15. NKJV)

Love for the brotherhood of believers is necessary evidence of saving faith. Hatred for the brotherhood is absolute proof that you are unsaved. For John love is a two directional thing. It comes down from the Father and overwhelms the true believer and overflows into loving service one to another.

## **5. Loving service – one to another**

We know this is what Jesus is referring to in 2:19 because he uses the word *diakonian* the word from which we get our “deaconate”. It means to serve each other with humility. It means to meet needs. A good church is full of people who delight to meet each other’s needs, Jesus says.

## **6. Faith**

A good church is also full of faith. The word faith is used many different ways in the Bible but here it seems to mean that these people are trusting in the Lord, they are relying on him, they are calling out to him daily for strength to serve and live as they ought. John Knox said famously that a person who does not pray with desperation in times of need or difficulty gives convincing proof of his atheism. These people are the opposite of that, they delight to grab hold of grace through prayer. They meet difficulty with prayerfulness and they are commended by Jesus for so doing.

## **7. Personal Holiness**

Look carefully at chapter 3:4:

<sup>4</sup>You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

<sup>5</sup>He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Revelation 3:4-5. NKJV)

Even in a church that is generally bad and even described as quite dead by the Lord Jesus, God holds individuals accountable for their personal holiness. He commends individuals within a church for the purity of their walk. They have not defiled their garments, isn't that a rich phrase? They were given white robes and they kept them white, they didn't run back to the gutter from which they were lifted to wallow with the pigs. As such, Jesus says, their names will not be smeared out from the Book of Life. This phrase is somewhat complicated so we will have to explain it briefly. Many scholars see in this phrase an example of the breadth of the salvation process as depicted in the Bible, as though Jesus were in the act of writing your name down – his intent was to save you, but your resistance – your refusal to separate yourself from the filth of the world - ultimately resulted in your being smudged out. The actual Greek word means to “smear out” and so that may be the idea. That is the meaning behind the teaching of Jesus in Luke's Gospel where he says:

<sup>32</sup>Remember Lot's wife. <sup>33</sup>Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. (Luke 17:32. NRSV)

The Angel of God was leading Lot's wife out of judgement and into salvation and at the last possible moment she turned back. She went as far into redemption as it is possible to go without being finally saved. In the very act of her name being written in the book of life it was smudged out. That is the likely meaning here. Real Christians seek holiness by the grace of God and are commended by Jesus for so doing.

There is quite a bit of repetition as the same things are commended in various churches but this seems to be the sum of what Jesus considers praiseworthy in the churches that he surveys and judges in chapters 2 and 3. Let's look now at what he rebukes:

## **What Jesus Rebukes:**

### **1. Loveless orthodoxy**

We see this famously in his rebuke to the church in Ephesus:

<sup>4</sup>But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup>Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

There is a dead orthodoxy that is possible in a church isn't there? A sort of joyless fidelity? This is likely what is in view here. They are orthodox, even carefully so, they are busy and active and yet, there is very little passion. History affords us numerous examples of this. Many theologically orthodox Evangelical Calvinistic churches have lived out this universal picture and we've probably all been to such a church. Good theology. Some good mission. Church discipline still happens but.... there is no love. No passion in worship, no joy in the Holy Spirit. Cold, dead orthodoxy. If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, have all knowledge and understand all mystery and even give my body to be burned but have not love I am nothing. This church is in danger of being disqualified for lack of passion, lack of desire for Jesus Christ. This is no small concern, indeed Jesus warns them:

If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Having given a rebuke, Jesus expects a response and if he doesn't see it he declares that there will be consequences. The lampstand will be removed. There is some slight disagreement as to what this means but they are differences of degree only. Some say that this refers to the loss of their witness; they may continue to live but they will have no Holy Spirit witness – no fruit. Others say it means that the church itself will be destroyed – naturally or otherwise. From this we are reminded that Jesus does not promise any church or any denomination the right to perpetual existence. Some denominations make it a practice to take money from fruitful congregations to prop up dying congregations when in fact sometimes, we must admit, God wants a church to die because they are no longer fit ambassadors for the kingdom. We'll deal with the next two simultaneously:

## **2. Lack of discernment**

## **3. Cultural compromise**

We see Jesus rebuking lack of discernment in 2:14:



<sup>14</sup>But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication. <sup>15</sup>So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Because this church lacked discernment they allowed two heretical teachings to exist in their midst. The first is called “the teaching of Balaam”. Now, it is very unlikely that there was a teacher in Pergamum who taught “Studies in Balaamite Doctrine” – this is almost certainly symbolic language. Balaam is a character from the Old Testament. Balaam was a prophet who was contracted by the pagan nations in Palestine to curse the people of Israel. The people who were living in the land saw the Israelites marching up out of Egypt through the desert and it was obvious to them that God was fighting for them and so they knew they had to remove the blessing of God from the Israelites in order to defeat them in battle. So they contracted a prophet named Balaam to put a curse on the Jews. Balaam tries several times to do so but each time he opens his mouth further words of blessing come pouring out. He realises that he cannot curse that which God is blessing. There is a good corrective sermon there for everyone who feels like their nasty neighbours have put a curse on them, but we don’t have time for that. When Balaam realises he can’t curse Israel he gives his employers sage advice: he tells them to send among the Israelites their most attractive women to entice the Israelites into mixed marriage and sexual immorality and to teach the Israelites how to worship the pagan gods of the land. If they do that, Balaam says, the Jews will curse themselves! You see the lesson from Balaam’s story is that sinful people cannot curse what God is blessing, but God’s people can curse themselves by engaging in cultural compromise! Now that story is imported into this letter as a way of saying: “Jesus will not tolerate cultural compromise in his church!” If we do sex like our culture and if we learn too much from our culture then we don’t have to worry about the witch next store, we’ve CURSED OURSELVES! Be discerning in these matters!

The second teaching we are less certain about. We don’t really know who the Nicolaitans are. We think they were a type of early Gnostic heresy but we can’t be sure. Many think they are just another version of same in terms of the Balaamite heresy. The point is that they are false teachers of a false Christianity and they cannot be tolerated within the church. Jesus expects to see **DOCTRINAL DISCERNMENT** in his church and he will not tolerate **CULTURAL COMPROMISE**.

#### **4. Spiritual adultery**

In 2:20 we see Jesus rebuking a church for spiritual adultery:

<sup>20</sup>But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Here we have another OT character, Jezebel. Again, it is highly unlikely that this false prophet was ACTUALLY named Jezebel. No Christian would name their daughter Jezebel that would be like naming your daughter: “Whore of Babylon” or your son “The Beast from the Sea” – no one would do that. Jezebel is an OT character. She was the pagan wife of King Ahab and she was the arch enemy of the prophet Elijah. She ruled her husband and introduced pagan worship into Israel including the fertility cults which incorporated ritualised prostitution. So it’s highly likely that the sexual imagery is doing what it often does in the Bible, serving as a metaphor for spiritual adultery. It is not so much that a real woman named Jezebel was enticing men from the church into her bed, although sexual misconduct is often included in spiritual adultery, what is most likely in view here is a false prophetess who is ruling the church in place of the natural male head that should have been leading – as was the case with the OT Jezebel and her cry baby husband Ahab – and leading the church into SPIRITUAL ADULTERY, that is false worship or a false husband. Do you see? The food sacrificed to idols likely implies that she was providing theological justification for participating in the pagan rites associated with the trade guilds. Cultural compromise for economic gain, in a nutshell; Jesus calls it spiritual adultery.

## **5. Lack of watchfulness**

The church in Sardis is rebuked for lack of watchfulness. The church seems to have taken on the spiritual personality of its city. Sardis is famous in ancient literature for its lack of watchfulness. Twice the city fell to an attacking army because they foolishly trusted in their rocky local geography instead of posting an adequate guard. Likewise the church seems to be operating without any fear or awareness of danger whatsoever. Jesus is not impressed. He says in 3:3:

Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. (Revelation 3:3. NKJV)

Jesus can frequently be found in the Gospels urging watchfulness upon his disciples:

<sup>42</sup>Watch therefore, for you do not know what <sup>f</sup>hour your Lord is coming.

<sup>43</sup>But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

<sup>44</sup>Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matthew 24:42-44. NKJV)

Jesus told us to watch the signs and to be prepared but he also said we did not know the hour. From this we understand that we will never know for sure when the Day of the Lord will be upon us but we should know when it is getting closer and when it falls on us we should not be panicking like everyone else, rather we should be pointing to Scripture and saying: “This is where we are, this is what comes next and this how you should prepare” that is part of the job of the church. Too many Christians have developed an allergy to eschatology in the wake of all the Y2K and Left Behind nonsense but we are not permitted to ignore this issue. We cannot be deterred by the excesses of the silly people, we have to press it and look out, we have to watch the signs and we need to be on guard against the wiles of the devil.

## **6. Lack of penitence**

We see this in Revelation 3:17:

<sup>17</sup>Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—

<sup>18</sup>I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

<sup>19</sup>As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. (Revelation 3:17-19. NKJV)

These people think they have it all together, they are rich – they are living their best life now it seems, they think themselves in need of nothing and they do not realize how eternally dangerous a place that is to be. Blessed are the poor in Spirit for THEIRS is the Kingdom of heaven. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Self sufficiency is death to the Gospel. The Gospel seed only takes root in a heart that is humble and penitent before God. Martin Luther’s 95 thesis began by asserting that the Christian life is fundamentally a DAILY EXERCISE in repentance. These folks didn’t see it that way. They say it as a path to earthly blessing and to material prosperity and well being, but Jesus said:

“Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. (Mark 8:34. NKJV)

Christianity is about dying to the self and lowering the self, it is destroyed and stamped out by the presence of pride, self sufficiency and contentment. This church didn't realize how much danger they were in because of their wealth. Wealth makes a person artificially secure. He begins to trust in it, he begins to find his identity in it and he begins to treat his money like a god. He receives from his money things he is meant to receive from God. He gives to his money things he was meant to give to God. That is why Jesus said: "How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God". (Mark 10:23) Wealth tends to destroy penitence and humility and Jesus rebukes this trend in one of his churches and he counsels them to seek refinement in the fire. Pray for suffering, pray for pain, pray for poverty so that you might save your souls, he says. Not exactly the prayer of Jabez is it? Is there a time to pray: "Oh God give me more!"? Sure there is. But rich people in danger of losing their souls to their money probably need to pray: "Oh God, take it all away! Give me ashes and dust and pain and loss that I might find you again!" There are different prayers for different seasons. This church needed less Jabez and more penitence.

### **Application:**

Well what do we do with lists like these? On the one hand we could relativise this material, we could say: "So Jesus has a list of some things he likes and doesn't like in a church, bully for Jesus. I have a list too. I like a nice nursery a youth pastor, up to date music and I don't like parking far away or a pastor who preaches for more than 30 minutes. We can't always get what we want though can we Jesus?" Now, few people would have the courage to actually say that, but it sure seems like they've taken that approach doesn't it? What should we do?

I confess that I find it almost impossible to evaluate ourselves against this grid. I feel inclined at first to say that we are pretty good at some of the things we should be pretty good at. We are a hard working church aren't we? We are the church that never sleeps, lots of local mission and so forth. But what is the standard? Are we like the Apostle Paul working our fingers to the bone late into the night to support the work of the Gospel in this city? I suspect that we feel pretty good about that because we are comparing ourselves to other churches. If we compare ourselves to the cross I suspect we will feel less optimistic.

At first I am inclined to feel like we are doing good with our intolerance. We seem to like shouty sermons about sin and evil and the need to be different than the world and we've even come to

accept the odd word of censure against the more obvious heretics out there in the great world of Christendom but again, comparing ourselves to the New Testament kind of quiet that enthusiasm doesn't it. Are we prepared to say with the Apostle Paul: "Let anyone who has no love for the Lord Jesus be accursed!" Or with Peter to the money hungry but professing Christian Simon Magus: "To hell with you and your money!"

As for the love stuff, that is improving surely but against what standard? Many members here are living really well while others are hardly scraping by at all. And the faith and prayer piece is treading water at best wouldn't you say? We get 50 people out for Body Prayer on a good night out of 650 people, that can't be a healthy ratio can it? The holiness piece makes me very nervous as well.

In terms of what Jesus rebukes I feel even more unsure. How are we doing on cultural accommodation and spiritual adultery? Wow. How about penitence? Anyone here finding their wealth a barrier to true humility and spiritual poverty before the Lord? I fear we must pray for pain and the fire to purge our souls.

So what is the way out? There is a very good suggestion in this passage that we will look at by way of conclusion. In Revelation 3:3 Jesus shows us the way we should go:

<sup>3</sup>Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. (Revelation 3:3. NKJV)

Remember the Gospel as you once heard and received it. Go back to the old wells. Dig up again the wells of your father Abraham. Return to the rock from which you were hewn and the quarry from which you were dug and stay there in a spirit of repentance. That is always the way back. The old way. The Old Evangelicalism. The old Gospel. The only Gospel. Let's find it again and hold it a little tighter this time around and let's repent and stay humble and prayerful before the Lord. Jody will you come and lead us in that?