

The Apocalypse | Finding Composure in the Unveiled Christ

“The Seven Churches (Part One)”

Revelation CH 2

4.25.21

*"To the angel of the church in **Ephesus** write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ² 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; ³ and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. ⁴ 'But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ 'Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent. ⁶ 'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'*

*"To the angel of the church in **Laodicea** write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: ¹⁵ 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, ¹⁸ I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. ²⁰ 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹ 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. ²² 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"*

Last week we began a series we hope to explore for the next while on the last book of the Bible, The Apocalypse or Book of Revelation (not plural).

Last week we mentioned that Revelation is like a massive wave. And as the preacher (for most of this series) I'm both excited AND a bit uneasy to surf the wave but not uneasy yet. We're in the easier part of the book.

Preachers who DO go to Revelation find this present section more relevant or preachable/manageable. IF you do remember hearing a sermon on the last book of the Bible – there’s a GOOD possibility it was from THIS section – the Letters to the Seven Churches.

We’re NOT planning a sermon on each letter but instead for two weeks to look at all seven letters and the patterns in them and then plunge into the more difficult parts of Revelation that you’ve probably NOT heard in sermons.

These letters are opportunities to do a health-check on our own church and the lives that make up this church. How do you THINK about the church? How do you see the Church (at large) and how do you see THIS church? What should a church BE and DO and how would we critique a church to know if it’s healthy or if it’s missing the mark? If you’re visiting us today, how do you go about making a decision like that? Do you use “user reviews” – do you check us out on YELP (is there an app for that?)

Let’s look at the local church from Heaven’s view – let’s look at these seven letters and these two (first and last in particular) to see what a church should be:

- 1) **The Pattern of the Letters**
- 2) **The Promise in the Letters**
- 3) **The Prescription from the Letters (follow through)**

In the seven churches, two (the first and last) are in very grave spiritual difficulty. The three middle churches (Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis) are in less difficulty but still vulnerable. The second and sixth are simply told to persevere in what they ARE and DO.

We’re looking at the two that are in deep spiritual distress – Ephesus and Laodicea – and maybe the most glaring similarity between these two declining churches is that they don’t know they’re sick.

The pattern for addressing the churches is consistent – there are attributes of Jesus from CH one (which we read last week); Jesus Christ uses the descriptors from CH one to greet each church. “The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand who walks among the seven lampstands” and again (3.14) “The Amen, the faithful, true witness and the beginning of the creation says THIS...”

Then a problem (in all but two) is identified. Then there’s a call to repent OR to persist in what they are/do.

Fourth is a call to listen and heed the critique. Finally there’s s promise to whoever overcomes (“to eat of the tree of life” [7] and “to sit down with Me on My throne as I sit on My Father’s throne...” [3.21]).

The first words Jesus Christ speaks to each of the seven churches are, "I know." It's a way of saying, "This is NOT a user-review. This is not a matter of taste or opinion or polls. This is the assessment of the One who knows... I know your deeds... I know your tribulation ... I know where you dwell..."

This is the One who dwells among the churches and holds the angel of each church in His right hand – and HE KNOWS (Ps 103.14). "Ephesus, I know your deeds, toil, perseverance that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they're not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. (2-3) This is a discerning church. This is NOT an immature church tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming..." (Paul's Letter to Ephesus 4.14)

The leadership of this church had heard the Apostle Paul say, "For I did not hold back from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." (Act 20.27-28)

And they took Paul's example and mandate VERY seriously. They didn't let just anyone get in the pulpit until that person was proven – even if the would-be teacher had credentials and was known as "an apostle". "We're not impressed with recognition or fame or style or titles – we want the whole counsel of God like Paul gave us." And they kept up that discernment... Which can be very tiring but they did not grow weary – these sheep belong to Jesus and we're not gonna let some fake shepherd come in and feed them junk!"

These two churches (Ephesus and Laodicea) – both critically ill – are censured for a similar reason: the first has left its first love and the second has cooled off: "you are neither cold nor hot...but lukewarm..."

The Ephesians lived in an immense city; the home of the great temple of Artemis. People came from all around to buy these fertility idols and there was a lot of spiritual STUFF floating around Ephesus! And the elders, deacons, congregation had worked, toiled and persevered and could not tolerate evil men like the Nicolaitans ... But in time, the Ephesian Christians became "heresy hunters" and more fixed on guarding against falsehood and evil ...and less fixated on the LOVE OF GOD IN Christ. The Gospel had ceased to amaze and ceased to thrill their hearts.

Ephesus was a seminary town – St Paul had taught there two years (Acts 19.9-10) and the newly planted church was fiercely evangelistic... but now, theology had been reduced to a cold-hearted science and all attempts at reaching their neighbors had stopped and all that mattered was keeping the church pure.

Something similar happened in Laodicea: they had gotten their act together. They were blessed with good jobs and income. Maybe some had shed their old habits/addictions that had kept them unproductive and made people look down on them – but NO MORE! They're now upwardly mobile, productive, respectable – they've come so far!

But like Ephesus, this church had cooled. They basically had their act together (Isn't that the purpose of religion – to help people get their act together?) And now that they were such model citizens, they didn't really need Jesus so much, “ ‘cuz... you know: it worked! So, we'll stay in the church but we'll step aside and let real sinners (like we used to be) we'll let the big sinners come to the trough.”

And the words of correction spoken by the “Amen... the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation” SEEM so...sharp...so harsh. “Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.”

There's evidence that there was a medical school in Laodicea and it specialized in ophthalmology but the eye ointment wouldn't help these Christians because their blindness was moral and spiritual.

Again – this is one big similarity in both these churches in grave spiritual danger: they seem to be all right... and the pastor/members don't realize that they are ANYTHING but all right!

For me, that's the creepy thing about these two churches and about us and me – we really don't see ourselves very clearly ...at ALL!

How would you even know if you had lost your first love or if you had become spiritually lukewarm... the two letters suggest, you probably wouldn't even know it. That's how blind we are to our own flaws.

But the Master of the Congregations sees. He begins His address with that assertion: “I know your deeds and what's motivating them...I know where you live and I know what obstacles you face... I KNOW.”

He has been among us in the flesh. He has faced temptation and He has triumphed where we have often failed. And He loves these churches...He is their first love. “We LOVE because He first loved us.”

Not drinking IN the love of God demonstrated in Christ...they had left His love for them (no big deal) and then they stopped loving Him (all the while they were toiling FOR Him as guardians of

the Truth). Then they stopped loving one another (maybe an air of suspicion pervaded their gatherings) and they failed to love the pre-believing people around them.

But He shows His love for us by KNOWING US... and in showing us the stuff about ourselves we don't want to see. He wants to free us from the web of our own self-deception and to restore us – “Those whom I love I expose and train them – I love them enough to put them through the redemptive trauma of seeing themselves as they really are...so to FREE them from destructive self-unawareness. You won't let others deceive you – but you deceive yourselves!”

“I came to get you”, says Jesus Christ, “I'm the Good Shepherd who left the glory of My home to save you NOT simply from your bad habits and from being a 'loser' so you could hold your head up at the condo-board meeting ... but I saved you for the Best Gift of All – for intimacy with ME!”

“Behold (Christian), I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice (Ps 29) and opens the door I will come in to him and will dine with him and he with Me. I want to be so close to you that YOU BECOME ONE with My good will/purposes and are able to rule with Me...as Adam and Eve ruled... to sit on My throne WITH Me as I sit on My Father's throne.”

Don't settle for cheap excuses like, “Well, I used to be knocked OUT by My first love...but...you know: you can't LIVE in that spiritual honeymoon stage forever.” And the Faithful Witness asks, “Why NOT? Remember from where you've fallen and repent and do what you did at first. I AM THE START of a New Creation (1.18) – after paying your debt in My death, I am alive and I am the Fountain of Life – I didn't come to make you successful or respectable but NEW AND ALIVE WITH ME FOREVER!”

Now, the Pattern, the Promise and the Prescription: what are we supposed to DO with this? How do we apply the medicine?

Well, we start with redemptive self-doubt. We realize that in either of these spiritual ailments we will NOT likely diagnose our own disease. We don't know ourselves as well as we think. (Matt 7.21ff).

Sometimes we get the diagnosis from others and that's one reason we NEED each other. AND NEED is a good word here: whenever we feel like we have it together in the spiritual life or the moral or the civic or the vocational or the relational or the parental life – when we find ourselves at all smug and looking down on big sinners who are just NEEDY and MESSED UP... “I'm rich, and have become wealthy, and have NEED of nothing,” - we deny the Gospel.

We show that we really don't get it – “I'm NOT OK. I am ever needy and always/only/completely depending on what Jesus Christ IS and HAS DONE!”

“You do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked...” That’s how I am without Jesus living the life I failed to live and dying the death I deserved to die – I’m wretched.

Every moment I have to be NEEDY toward Him... and when I am, then I find I can be loving God and loving people... In that place I am apt to share God’s love with OTHERS instead of looking down on them.

It enables me to live in a state of repentance – to see that even in nice clothes and a good job and no life-controlling needs/addictions – STILL – I’m just as needy as anyone; without the righteousness of Jesus that’s attributed to me (but for which I did NOTHING to earn or deserve) I’m just plain old, “wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked...”

And that self-knowledge leads to actual humility and from that place I can move toward other people to love them – NOT in a paternalistic way but as a fellow sinner who needs grace and offers grace.

Should WE be less doctrinal than the Ephesians? NO, but let’s listen (if we have ears to hear) let’s listen to the doctrine we defend and proclaim. “Whoever is forgiven much”, said Jesus Christ, “he is the one who loves much” (Luke 7.47). If we want more love let’s see that we’re more forgiven than we’ve imagined. And let’s start right now by telling God, in the quiet, “Lord, YOU KNOW our deeds and there’s a good possibility that I’m smug and NOT NEEDY for Grace.

Send the Spirit to say to the Churches and say to ME – “open the door and let Him in... only the Spirit can bring back that loving feeling of my First Love!”