

“The 2019 – 2020
‘State of the Church’
address”

- Revelation 2 & 3 -

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TEXT: REVELATION 2 – 4.



Today as we look back not only over the past year but the past quarter century of this church’s existence, we have much to be joyous about. We have come a very long way from the days of white plastic chairs in the old storefront downtown. I can’t help but feel that the last year in this church was the greatest and most successful year in our history. God has indeed blessed us as He has graciously allowed us to participate in so many of His wondrous works. We are larger today and more financially stable than at any point in our history. We are more involved in active ministries than ever, and we are seeing His hand of kingdom strength like never before. It would be very easy to stand before you today and tell you all is good...that we have arrived at some sort of proverbial ‘promised land’ where we will all indulge in ‘milk and honey.’ But let us remember that in that promised-land lay giants who stood before them. They may have found their way home, but they would not keep possession of it without a fight.

Scripture and history records that 11 of the 12 apostles...despite all they saw and experienced, would eventually die martyrs deaths for their service to the King of glory. The one man left standing...albeit not without his own tribulations, was the young John, though by the time he penned the Vision of the Revelation he had aged considerably and was sequestered away in banishment on the island of Patmos. Oh the things he must have seen up until that day! The stories he could tell!

In the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation the apostle John began to share the vision before him. Christ presented to John the picture of seven churches. Many see this picture as one representing *all* churches though out all time...or at least the corporate or universal dangers that churches continually face. Certainly most of these examples before us were full of compromise and spiritual decay. One need not look far to draw a very real picture of the state of the greater church today.

We see in verse one of chapter two, that “*Christ ...walked in the midst of*” these seven churches. So despite their stark shortcomings, He had not deserted them! He still walked among them, watching them and seeking a righteous and committed fellowship with them.

Each of the letters before us are written to “*the angel*” of a particular church. Just who these angels are, or what is meant by the title is a matter of conjecture. In truth, the word is better interpreted *messenger*, and it is believed by many to refer to the human “under-shepherd” ...the pastor who had direct contact with those within the church, and ultimately held the responsibility for what went on inside it. So if that picture is correct, while this letter is meant to be heeded by all of us, it is especially addressed to me today. Thus I bring to you today how it is speaking to me...

We remember how Paul had warned the church elders on his final departure from them, that wolves would arise even from among the church. How they would have to be alert and discerning toward those who would try to

lead them. Their commitment to holiness drove them to that diligence. They held their leaders to a proper standard.

The churches of Revelation present the reader with a paradox of weakness and strength. The weak, the small, the poor churches in Revelation are commended the most, while the rich, confident, and impressive churches receive the least commendation. Therefore we would be in error to judge a church by the world's standards—budgets, buildings, and bodies, but rather by God's standard for churches—faithfulness and steadfastness.

1. Ephesus: *"I know your works..."* is a phrase that is found in each of these letters. Christ is stating from the beginning that each of these churches are an open book before Him, and He sees clearly their "works," their *deeds and activities*. He is aware of Ephesus' *works*, their *labors*, and their *patience*. How they are unwilling to put up with evil in their midst.

It seems Christ had no complaint as far as their diligence in these areas are concerned. He recognizes their attributes and commitment; how they readily dealt with those who claimed to be sent from God, but in reality were not. Christ commended their sacrificial deeds. He commended their sound doctrine. And He commended their steadfast diligence. They were commended for their continuance through the trials, the tribulations, and the persecutions. They had stood strong and continued to work. They were vigilant and did not back down even through the tough times.

Yet despite these great attributes and accolades, they still had a glaring issue that seems had rendered all the rest null and void. They had apparently had become so involved with *doing*, that they forgot that they were first to be *loving*. Despite all their activities, all their "busy-ness," they had failed to keep their eyes on the prize. They were caught up in all the activities of church, while the *central purpose* of all that activity was forgotten.

Therefore correction is given. Christ still loves them and is still in the game with them, but there had to be some course correction. The Lord corrects this loveless church with a path to restoration: They had to remember from where they had fallen. ...to remember what it was like when Christ first saved them. They needed to remember the 'beginning.' If the church didn't heed the Lord's call to repentance, then Jesus would remove its very existence. 'While individuals have eternal security, churches do not.'

You see, despite this churches zeal and activity, this church had forgotten their purpose and motivation. In perfect "Jesus-style," our Lord does not write them off, but as He always does, He calls them to repentance. He calls them to "come back" to where they had set down their first love, and to pick Him up once again. Their *minds* and *bodies* may have been right, but their *hearts* were amiss.

The church is by nature, a light in a dark world. Unless this church, and all those like it, turn back to their "first love," they would be removed as a church "light." We see churches closing around this country and we can tend to feel that Christianity is on the retreat, but in fact what is happening is that Christ, as promised, is simply "removing their lampstand from their place" because they would not heed His warning and direction. As we look towards the city of Ephesus (in the country of Turkey) today, we see it lost in the cloud of Islam, for that church has indeed been removed. No less is promised to any fellowship that is not diligent to keep their love of Christ first in the church.

Christ instructs them to *"do your first works..."* Notice that the instructional remedy for this misguided energy is not to tell this church to *stop serving and acting on behalf of the faith*. Often there are those that want to use such passages as this one to excuse themselves from *serving their brethren*, and to license themselves to sit in bible studies, pray a lot and read Christian books. These folks will often take the supposed 'high road' and express their love in words and emotion, but are lazy for the kingdom. This was not Christ's answer to this problem. The manifestation of this love is still to *do*, but to do *the "first works"* of our faith.

With the words of His earthly ministry still echoing through time, Jesus once again calls upon all those who would hear to “*hear what the Spirit is saying.*” For there are those that *overcome* and there are those that *are overcome*. The latter is lost. Not the loss of their salvation, for “*they departed from us, proving that they were not of us.*” The fact that they failed to continue the battle only manifested that they were never changed, never born again, and were never saved in the first place. But for the individual that *is* indeed born again and proves it by the fact that he *overcomes* all that spiritually stands in his way, he will be awarded the gift of eternal life. Endurance is not the *path* to salvation, it is path of *those saved*.

1. Smyrna: We read of how the situation in Smyrna was one of hardship and persecution. Jesus however blames not the occupying army of the Romans for the persecution in Smyrna, but rather the Jews...the established church of that age.

The “troublers” in this case, were those who claimed to be on God’s side, but according to Christ, were of the *synagogue of Satan*. In other words, it was not the secular world that was persecuting the church, but it was coming rather from those who saw themselves as chosen of God who were harassing these believers. Those who arrogantly believed they were in right standing spiritually but were actually oppressing and attacking the true and faithful church. Jesus not only knew *of* their tribulation, but He *knew* their tribulation. He had walked the road they were walking, He had felt the pain they were feeling. And it seems that the church in Smyrna was *afraid*...

The church in Smyrna is called upon to be faithful: Faithfulness doesn’t mean that we suppress our feelings. Instead, faithfulness means we pursue boldness in the face of fear. “Boldness is not a personality type, but it is to be clear in the face of fear.” And the reality is that the righteous church will often be persecuted by those who see themselves as God’s chosen church.

2. Pergamos: They too like Smyrna were praised for having “*held fast to the name of Christ, and did not deny the faith even in the days of persecution.*” The Lord knows all of the spiritual warfare that we are engaged in as His followers, and in the midst of all of these difficult circumstances these folks remained devoted to Jesus and they did not deny His faith and they stood as faithful witnesses by His good grace.

Yet the description of Pergamos as “Satan’s seat” is a way of saying that Satan had a strong foothold in Pergamos. Even so, the church there had “held fast to His name,” and had not “denied the faith.” But despite this churches faithfulness, they too still had issues. The city of Pergamos was renowned for both its intellect as well as its idolatry. Certainly the worship of false gods is not limited to the uneducated and backward members of society. In truth, it permeates every level of our world. Pergamos was a center of science and refinement. In addition to being the oldest city in Asia, Pergamos led the known world in education and medicine, and boasted of a 200,000 volume library. This city thought themselves to be pretty smart, and it seems the church there had followed suit.

While their idolatrous worship was directed toward many things, it was mainly aimed toward *themselves*...it was “self-worship” at its fullest. The downfall of this church was its alliance with the world. It had become prideful in its skills and intelligence, and had attempted to exist with one foot in the world and one foot in God.

John herein, through the Spirit’s anointing, is likening the sin of Pergamos to that of Old Testament Balaam. It was Balaam who attempted to do what many of us attempt to do today. And that was to *compromise* the absolute commitment to the Lordship of Jehovah God. The church at Pergamos, like many today, desired to make God a *part* of their lives, without giving themselves over to Him completely. The church in Pergamos wanted the peace and comfort of a spiritual presence in their lives, while still enjoying the pleasures of sin and the flesh. This church exists widely even today, from the “name-it-and-claim-it” *prosperity doctrine* churches, to the compromising “feel-good, user friendly” fellowships throughout the world.

In this church as in Ephesus, we again see the “*doctrine of the Nicolaitans.*” Without details of these folks we can at least gather that they had an innate characteristic of lifting themselves up as prophets and messengers of God, but were in reality only in it for themselves, and were not speaking for God at all. These folks were the recipients of the “hatred” of Christ Himself.

Christ directs His words toward those who would hear. Those who are truly listening. Not just *listening*, but *hearing*. The pews of America’s churches are *full* of those who are listening, but few will *hear*.

3. Thyatira: “Tolerance” is a huge buzz word in our culture, and yet it seems that in many churches, just like in Thyatira, there is an overt emphasis on tolerance that becomes more than the word provides.

Christ has much good to say about this church. They had a record of good works, service, faith, love and patience. In fact, all these things seem to be *increasing*. Again we must note that many of these churches here in revelation, if not *all* of them, have *good attributes*. That is important when we look at each one. For we often erroneously think that *problem* churches would be as obvious as can be, and their sins would be evident at first glance. But a church can be ninety-nine percent “on,” yet be amiss on a very crucial one percent. A small amount of sin still makes a sinner.

Again, the words of Jesus demonstrate that Thyatira was good when it came to works, service, and love. It may have even been the kind of church that when you walk in you feel like you belong. However, in their attempt to focus on love they began to tolerate everything. Thyatira adopted the mindset that love equals unconditional affirmation. Worse yet, they allowed this openness to be taught in and throughout the church. Their message was one of blind love and undiscerning openness.

This led to an acceptance of an idolatrous woman with erroneous influence. Revelation calls her Jezebel to draw the readers mind back to the OT story. While this woman wasn’t actually *the* Jezebel, her influence was leading the church astray in the same manner. The church was allowing someone like that to have sway over their people. In a picture of the Jezebel of Old Testament fame, this church is guilty of *her* sin, and hers was the gross sin of idolatry. Specifically, **they** were guilty of putting up with her in their midst. This church’s mistake was not only in their *involvement* in these sins, but moreover *allowing it in their midst*.

The message in Thyatira that was being presented would be akin to allowing anything to stand in the church for the sake of politically correct tolerance. Be tolerant. Just love people. Don’t worry about issues like holiness and purity. This allowance of things like idolatry and sexual immorality might be best summarized in the words of David Wells, “worldliness is whatever makes sin look normal and righteous look strange.” Christ was calling His church...He is calling *us*, to purity and total commitment. And especially in these last days, ninety-nine percent will not suffice. Like these churches of Revelation, we will not win the battle if we hold back even one percent.

This language may be tough for us to bear, but our God will spare no expense to take care of His sheep. He is truly the master shepherd. Not only will He deal soundly with this “Jezebel,” but also with all those who involve themselves in her sin. Whether it be the fleshly sin of physical sexual adultery, or the spiritual adultery of idolatry (*placing anything as more important than the true and living God*), the penalty is the same. We will indeed reap what we sow. He “searches our hearts;” He knows “*that which controls us.*”

4. Sardis: The only thing that could be said on a positive note concerning this church was that it had a good reputation. It was known as an “alive” church, but in truth it was dead. He said “*You have reputation for being alive, but I know you are dead.*” This is a warning against nominal Christianity, a false presumption of salvation. They pretend to be something they are not.

We see the “churches of Sardis” out there even yet today. For we live in the age of the mega-church; those with the money, attendance, material wealth and resources to gather public attention and popularity amongst the

people of the world. They often cater to the desire for amenities and “bells and whistles,” and have a focus on any and every “feel good” aspect. Whether it be leaving *out* the unpleasant parts of Scripture, or the hyping up of the ones that fire the emotions. These of the likes of Sardis are the churches of the “empty profession.”

No doubt there was plenty of activity there in the church of Sardis. The problem was that it was the kind of activity that pushes out the focus and the presence of Christ. He calls this church to focus upon that which is truly, eternally important. He tells them that He recognizes that their *works* are not “perfect” or *complete* before God. Notice that although certainly their *words* were a reflection of their hearts and passions, it was indeed this *physical manifestation* of their hearts and passions that He was looking for.

They were, no doubt, like many churches today claiming to love God but doing nothing to show it. They were merely “going through the motions” of religion, and while movement was present, it was fruitless activity that did nothing to further the Kingdom of God.

5. Philadelphia: This church is the only one of the seven that receives no correction or rebuke. Because of this fact, we are apt to quickly place the church of Philadelphia sign over our church door. It’s always easy to see ourselves as the ideal fellowship!

Much like many of the churches we find addressed in Revelation, the church in Philadelphia was under persecution. In truth, any church that is worth its salt will find itself in such position. Despite these trials they *still stood strong*. This indeed is the true test of any believer, as well as any fellowship of believers. For it is through the storms of difficulty that we find out what we are truly made of.

They were not only zealous *for Christ*, but zealous to *serve Him*. In good times and bad, they *kept serving*. This is what separated them from the rest of the pack. This fellowship actually *practiced* their claims of faith! He states the truth: *they, as well as we today, have little strength*. It is clear that access to the throne was not a matter of their own strength and power, for they had very little.

Verse 11 says *“Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.”* In the grand scheme of things, we have but a short period before He returns. No doubt we will look back from the heavenly realm and think, “man, that went fast!” Until then, we are called to “hold fast to what we have.” What *DO* you have Christian? For He has given salvation, faith, passion, and His guaranteed care. Do you still have all of that?

Our danger is not in losing our salvation, but losing our *crown*. For *that*, man *can* take! Men have been stealing the crowns of believers, the rewards of Christians since the beginning. The weapons they use to steal them are plentiful. Distractions, material possessions, money, lust, and idolatry. Pretty jealousy, self-entitlement, pride... In general, *all the things of this world...*

6. Laodicea: was a church known for its affluence and its grand exterior. Yet Jesus rebukes them just the same. They thought so highly of themselves...saying, “I am rich.” They thought they had arrived and that they were all set. The leader of the pack. The best of the bunch.

Yet the Lord delivers herein, in my opinion, the worst of all the rebukes. It is in truth the most insidious occurrence and the most common. These of Laodicea are accused of being “lukewarm.” There is no hiding this attribute from the Lord, even if we can hide it from all others around us. How long will it take to acknowledge the fact that our Lord seeks *absolute, sold-out commitment* to our work and service?

Jesus was stating that they were neither really spiritual or overtly pagan, because as it was, *they were nothing*. Make note that such a stance literally *nauseates* our Lord! A graphic picture of a literal *vomiting* Christ. Why? Because of the horror of sin? The shame of the state of humanity? However terrible these things are, they are not what repulses our Lord in this passage. It is the *passive complacency* of a church that is not radical for Him.

God sees such a church as “*afflicted, miserable, helpless, and without.*” This is the ultimate state of man in denial.

This church was lost in the nebulous ‘no-mans-land’ out in the spiritual struggle. The perceived “Switzerland” of the spiritual world. But in reality there was no neutral and there is none today. If you are not “with Him, then you are against Him.” Thus in this throw down, Christ is saying that He wishes they were *good for something*. This church was rebuked for having no purpose at all. We today excuse ourselves, and build churches where we can slip comfortably into theater seating and be entertained, rather than heeding the dying of the world around us. Our Lord would rather us be *cold* than lukewarm. At least it is honest! At least we would be *sold out* to our pursuit.

Verse 20 tells us that Christ was and is still knocking. Indeed it seems that he is for many churches still standing on the *outside*, desiring to come in. But we must hear His voice...we must *open the door*. He stands here *outside* the church...and so often *outside* the hearts of men. To both of these He calls! But such must begin with the knocking upon the door of the heart of each individual man and woman. The **one man** participating in the building of the Kingdom of God. What are **you** bringing to the table in this church...this fellowship of believers?

What brought these churches down? A church without the priority of real love in all their activities. A church that was afraid of those outside its doors. A church that was comfortable and thought themselves to have arrived. A church that had become overtly tolerant to sin in their midst. A church that prioritized its reputation in the world over its integrity of faithful adherence to God and scripture. A church distracted by the things of this world. A comfortable albeit lukewarm church.

Jesus is knocking on the door of the church today. If we answer the door, He will come in and commune with us. Together we will share a “communion meal.” Can you imagine? Dinner with Jesus Christ? The Lord is speaking, but do we hear Him? Are we still listening? Our sign says “biblical”...and “missional”...these are great attributes. But I ask you today...are we...will we, seek to continue to be “radical?”