**THE MESSAGE TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES, PART 1**

**REVELATION CHAPTER 2**

Prayer: “Oh God, make us the people you want us to be. Search our hearts with your Word. Purge any sin from our lives. Lord, make everything we do as individuals and as a church be relevant and may we honor You.”

Last week we began a study in the Book of Revelation. We had a brief introduction to the book and then covered Ch 1. Our glorified Lord, Jesus Himself appears to John on the island of Patmos. He instructs John to “Write the things which you have seen and the things which are and the things which shall take place after these things.” The things which are, Chapters 2 and 3, looks into the spiritual condition of the present-day church. The things which will take place after these things is Chapter 4 on. The future events surrounding the end times. This morning we’re going to focus our attention on our Lord’s messages to 4 of the 7 churches of Asia Minor. We will look at what Jesus has to say to the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira. This is covered in Revelation Chapter 2.

Let me say something about the various interpretations about these 7 letters to the churches. There are several interpretations which have been batted around by theologians. Some say these 7 churches represent 7 periods of church history from Pentecost to the Rapture (commonly referred to as the Church age). Some say these represent 7 types of churches or 7 types of Christians. Although there is some validity to these interpretations, there is nothing in Scripture to substantiate these viewpoints. They’re only someone’s conjecture.

I hold to another interpretation, much more straightforward – that these are 7 direct messages to 7 local churches of John’s day. These 7 churches were very real churches made up of regular ordinary people. Just like our churches today, these churches had some good characteristics and some areas in which they struggled. Though times change, people at their core do not. So, we can find personal application from these letters. I’m going to go out on a limb and say that wherever you are spiritually, Jesus will address somewhere in these 7 letters. Are you listening?

**1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.**

From Ch 1 we learned that the stars refer to the pastors and that the one who hold them in His hand is Jesus. We noted that the seven golden lampstands are the 7 churches. Jesus holds the pastors of these 7 churches in His right hand. He has called them. He protects them. Jesus walks among the churches. He’s fully aware of what’s going on in them.

**2 ‘“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.**

**3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.**

Jesus starts off by commending the church at Ephesus. They’re doing a lot of things right! They’re a hard-working church. They possess a patient endurance. In a minute I’ll talk about the part of the verse that says they cannot bear with those who are evil. Let me come back to that.

**4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.**

The KJV says, “You have left your first love.” That’s why I refer to the church at Ephesus as “The church that left its first love” This church had a lot of good things going for it, but it had one negative thing – a lack of love for the Lord and for others.

In 1 Cor 13:1 Paul wrote, “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.” In other words, the church at Ephesus, like the church in Corinth, was nothing more than noise…busy, persevering, patient, doctrinally sound noise! What a racket and waste of time! Unless what the church does operates under the umbrella of God’s love, a love for Him and a love for each other, it will accomplish little for the kingdom of God. But Jesus doesn’t just criticize them. He has a remedy, a solution for.

**5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.**

 Jesus tells them, “You either repent or I will take away the lampstand. Would God really do that? Take away the church? History bears out that, in fact, He did. In the Middle East, the birthplace of Christ and Christianity, we see that most of the present population practices the Muslim religion, NOT Christianity. Look at Europe, which gave us Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Tyndale, and the reformation. Europe has some of the grandest cathedrals in the world. Christianity in Europe today is a shrinking minority of the population. Spiritually they have become ice cold. In the United States things aren’t much better. If we, the church, don’t repent and get right with God, then He may take our lampstands away as well. We desperately need a revival!

**6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**

Jesus returns to commending this church. One of their big strengths is that they did not put up with false teachings. Back in v 2 Jesus commended them for not bearing those who are evil, those who call themselves apostles but are false. In other words, this church is doctrinally sound. They scrutinize, examine every teaching, holding it up against the litmus test of God’s Word. Here in this verse they hate the works of the Nicolaitans. Who were these Nicolaitans? They believed that their spiritual freedom gave them the right to practice immorality. This group of believers saw right through this false idea. This was a church that had a lot of things going for it but they needed to work on their lack of love.

**7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’”**

Jesus is calling for His church to listen to His message and obey it. The promise of an eternal presence with God is attached to this.

8 **“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.** Again, for emphasis, these are the words of Jesus Himself.

9 **‘“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

Jesus knows the condition of the church and mentions 3 distinguishing marks they have: (1) they are suffering persecution; (2) poverty (When the believers at Smyrna converted to Christianity their property was often confiscated and they lost their jobs); (3) being blasphemed against, having false charges brought against them. So here you have a church that was being severely persecuted for their faith in Christ. That last phrase, “a synagogue of Satan” indicates that our enemy the Devil sometimes disguises himself. At Smyrna, Satan’s forces disguised themselves as Jews, but in reality they were not.

**10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

I interpret this verse literally. For the church at Smyrna they were about to experience a literal ten-day period of intense persecution, for many unto death, which this church would soon experience. Those who are faithful unto death, and most were which is why I call the church at Smyrna the Faithful Church, Jesus says, they will receive “the crown of life.” Only those who totally commit themselves to Him are worthy to wear it. James 1:12 says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”

**11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’”**

Jesus never taught His disciples that if they remained faithful He would remove their troubles, suffering and persecution. As we know from history and tradition, ten of the faithful 11 died martyrs deaths. Only John died of natural causes. We must remain faithful to Him in our sufferings and, by doing so, we prove whether or not our faith in Christ is genuine. Remember Jesus’ words to His disciples in the upper room: Jesus Himself said, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

**12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.**

Ephesians Chapter 6 says that the sword is the Word of God. Jesus is here speaking the word of God, a direct message to this church. I call the church at Pergamum the compromising church.

**13 "'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.**

The church is commended for holding to the truth and not denying their faith even unto death, when one of their own, a man named Antipas, is martyred. To their credit, the Christians of Pergamum did not denounce Jesus in the face of persecution.

**14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.**

**15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**

 Balaam in the Book of Numbers led the people of Israel astray and they offered sacrifices to the Moabite gods and committed fornication. This angered God and many Israelites lost their lives as a result. Satan’s strategy today against Christians is similar to Balaam’s, that is, to neutralize their witness so that God cannot use them or they will be ineffective. Just as Israel had tolerated in their ranks pagan people who did not believe in Jehovah and their pagan rituals, so too the church at Pergamum grew tolerant of false gods such as Bacchus, Zeus and others. This was the essence of the doctrine of Balaam, a tolerance of evil that hurts your witness for Jesus Christ. We already talked about the teaching of the Nicolaitans, basically a compromise of Christian ethics and morality.

So while it is true that the church at Pergamum stood firm in their own faith, they failed to speak out against the false doctrines and, in affect, embraced them.

**16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.**

The sword out of His mouth is the Word of God. Jesus is coming in judgment and authority to deal with those in the church who hold to the doctrine of compromise. How will He do that? He doesn’t say. But He is a gracious Lord and He gives this church an opportunity to repent first.

**17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’”**

Two promises are contained in this verse. The manna He promises is what sustains, the bread of life, Jesus. A white stone is a stone of acquittal. When men were being judged in those days, those who stood in judgment would cast a stone as a vote – white for innocent and black for guilty. In this verse Jesus casts a white stone, meaning that we believers have been acquitted from the penalty of our sin. Therefore, as overcomers, we can stand triumphantly before Jesus Christ.

**18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.**

Again these are the words of Jesus, the Son of God. His eyes are the eyes of judgment. He sees us as we really are – including our sin. Fire pictures judgment. Not only does He see our sin, but He treads upon it. He treads down the iniquity He sees under His feet. Feet represent authority. So here we see Jesus coming to this church in judgment and authority.

**19 "'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.**

Jesus’ message starts off promising. He has some good things to say about this church. They had good works, love, faith, service and patient perseverance.

**20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.**

Unfortunately, the church, even the 1st Century church, got off track and the church at Thyatira, well, let’s just say, they completely derailed! This church is what I refer to as the adulterous church because it had become easily deceived by a false doctrine and embraced iniquity. Jesus compares them to Jezebel of the OT. You know how wicked she was!

**21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.**

The church at Thyatira had become nothing more than a religious country club. It was organized and doing good things in the community but without God’s power. A church with a potential for greatness had become mediocre. The Lord is patient and shows grace. He gives her time to repent but as history bears out she refuses to do so.

**22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works,**

**23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.**

God’s judgment is often slow in coming, but when it finally does come it is swift and fair.

**24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden.**

Jesus reassures the faithful few in the church who had NOT embraced the false teachings, sarcastically referred to as “the deep things of Satan,” that they will not fall under the burden of His judgment.

**25 Only hold fast what you have until I come.**

Jesus is coming back! Until then you faithful few keep right on doing what you have been doing. Hold fast to the truth.

**26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,**

**27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.**

**28 And I will give him the morning star.**

Jesus says that if you hold fast to these things I’ll not only give you authority and power to reign with Me in My kingdom on earth during the Millennium, but here and now I will give you My presence. “Morning star” is a reference to Jesus Christ. What an awesome promise, that we will have His presence, all of Him, all that He is in all of His fullness.

**29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”’**

Jesus has something to say to us, His church, no matter where we might be spiritually. Are we listening to Him?