

Part 1: Sermon – Jesus Knows the Churches¹

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Today I draw your attention to chapters two and three of the book of Revelation. You will recognize them as containing the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Letters dictated to the apostle John by Jesus himself. Letters to seven actual congregations. The seven cities are located in what is now Turkey, though some are just archaeological digs. The seven churches are all less than fifty years old. They represent a cross-section of the church in its first century. They are not unlike a cross-section of the American church or even perhaps the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

It is rather startling to hear Jesus speaking directly to a local church. What if He spoke to your church or to mine? What would He say? It may be that in speaking to these seven churches, He intended for us to apply His messages to our congregations. Let's assume that's the case.

Notice how Jesus identifies each congregation. He calls them by their city. Not by denomination, nor by the preacher, nor by the name the church selected to attract visitors. He addresses His words to the

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believers in a specific location. It's rather missional, I think. Jesus identifies a church by its mission field. We should try thinking of ourselves as the followers of Jesus living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, or Nairobi, Kenya, or Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

But then Jesus identifies Himself with each church. Actually, He reveals aspects of His glory to the different churches here in Revelation two and three. The First and the Last, the One who is holy and true, who holds the key of David, the Son of God whose eyes are like blazing fire, the ruler of God's creation. The descriptions Jesus uses all refer back to the initial vision of Jesus that John saw in chapter one.



Each church seems to have a particular aspect of Jesus' glory assigned to them. It's almost as if no one church can possibly handle all of Jesus' glory and must take the Son of God in small doses.

Jesus begins each letter with the words, "I know." I discern, I see inside, below the surface, behind the masks. I know the true state of each church. I recognize strengths and weaknesses, obedience and disobedience. Five of the seven churches are commended for things they are doing well. The two that are not are in big trouble. One Jesus calls "dead" and the other He says He is about to spit out of His mouth. His letters to these churches are intended to jolt them out of their complacency.

Actually, Jesus speaks bluntly and critically to five of the seven churches. The two that He exempts, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are both experiencing severe persecution. That's not very comforting for all of

us who live in the “unpersecuted” church. Is it possible we are missing out on something? The apostle Peter wrote about a blessing that comes to those who suffer for the name of Christ. There appears to be a bond between a suffering Savior and a suffering church. I think this is why so many of us are attracted to the church in Africa and Asia and the Middle East. We detect the spiritual maturity of these believers that seems to thrive in poverty and oppression. We recognize that we need them far more than they need us.

Two of the seven, Pergamum and Thyatira, have allowed false teaching to take root. The Evil One has penetrated their ranks and is leading them astray. The false teachers are not only introducing bad doctrine but also immoral behavior and compromises with the worldly culture around them. The greatest dangers to the church always come from within. Had the elders of these churches failed to instruct the people in the Word of God, or had they failed to discipline wayward members, or both? Jesus calls these two churches to repent.

Two of the seven, Ephesus and Laodicea, had even deeper problems according to Jesus. Their failures were of the heart and the soul. Ephesus was actually praised for its hard work and diligence and for resisting bad theology and maintaining the truth – as solid an evangelical church as you will find – but tragically they had lost their first love, their devotion to Jesus, their connection to the love of Jesus for a fallen world. Their hearts were cold. Laodicea was perhaps even worse. They had become indifferent and content with themselves and their worldly comforts. They were smug and satisfied and had no idea how desperate and pathetic they really were. Ephesus and Laodicea should cause us to tremble because both were deluded and didn’t even know they were in trouble. They would have if they had stayed closer to Jesus.

We must not overlook the love Jesus has for all seven churches despite their failures. All seven are given spectacular promises. Special blessings will come to the churches if they are victorious. The imagery of these blessings – eating from the tree of life, hidden manna, a white stone with a new name written on it, walking with Jesus dressed in white – is a challenge to interpret but they all suggest intimacy and closeness to the Triune God in heavenly glory. Exactly what Jesus prayed in John 17 for all His disciples whom He sent into the world in His name.

In his series of sermons on Revelation, Eugene Peterson suggests that Jesus is offering spiritual direction to the seven churches. By spiritual direction, he means positive affirmation, corrective discipline and a promise of His own faithfulness that was intended to motivate the

churches to persevere. Some years ago my wife received formal training in the practice of spiritual direction, and since then she has made herself available to individuals who want to examine their own relationship with God and be encouraged in their journey with Christ. There are times in our walk with the Lord when we all could benefit from spiritual direction, especially if it is provided by a companion who listens and prays and holds you accountable. I hope you have someone like that in your life.

But it is clear from these letters of Jesus that churches also need spiritual direction. Congregations can lose touch with their Lord. In fact, if these seven churches are at all typical, then most churches will stray and will need to be disciplined by Jesus. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. We would be fools to think that everything is just fine with our churches after reading these seven letters. Today let us ponder what the Spirit is saying to our churches through these letters.

There's an echo of the Old Testament prophets calling the people to repentance in the letters of Jesus to the seven churches. The prophet Joel declares:

Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly.

Gather the people,
consecrate the assembly;
bring together the elders,
gather the children,
those nursing at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her chamber.

Let the priests, who minister before the LORD,
weep between the temple porch and the altar.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD.
Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?' " (Joel 2:15-17)

It is God's people who must repent of their disobedience and their idolatry and their failure to love and honor the Lord their God. The

world needs God's people to bear witness and reflect the glory of His name and not bring shame and scorn upon it. Our disobedience to the Lord of the church only reinforces the world's rebellion against God and its hardness of heart toward the Gospel.

Jesus has us in the world for a purpose. We disobey Him when we retreat from the world. We also disobey Him when we compromise with the world. Our growth as a mission-focused and mission-driven denomination will have to begin with confession of our failure to live up to what Jesus expects and wants of our churches.

This morning I invite you to pray prayers of confession to God on behalf of your congregation, on behalf of our denomination and on behalf of the church of Jesus Christ that is found in every city and town in this nation.