

Session 4 The Seven Churches: Called to Overcome (Rev. 2-3)

For **additional study material pertaining to this session, see mikebickle.org*

I. REVIEW: MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

- A. The book of Revelation is called the **revelation of Jesus** because it reveals the majesty of His heart and leadership in His plan to transition the earth to the age to come. Secondly, it is a book about events that take place in His end-time plan to purify the Church, bring in the harvest, and replace evil governments. The main point in Revelation is to *reveal the Man behind the plan*.

¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him [Jesus] to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. He sent and signified it by His angel to...John... (Rev. 1:1)

Let's do a quick review. Revelation 1:1, "The revelation of Jesus which God gave to Jesus to show His servants—the things which must shortly take place." God the Father determined how much the Son could reveal about the end time plan. It was the Father's choice. He gave it to the Son and said, "You can share this much."

*The book of Revelation is called the revelation of Jesus. That is so obvious to us, but it is easy to miss. The book often becomes about events. But the book is **not** mostly about events. It is not about the plan itself. That is secondary. It is the Man behind the plan that the book is about. It is a book about Jesus. That is, the book of Revelation is called the revelation of Jesus because it reveals His heart. It reveals His leadership.*

- B. In Revelation 1-3, John shared a vision highlighting **30 descriptions** of Jesus' majesty, ministry, and personality, and **18 eternal rewards**. Each description and reward communicates a specific insight into Jesus that is necessary in equipping the Church to overcome compromise. We identify the 30 descriptions from Jesus' titles, names, appearance, actions, and clothing.

In the vision that John saw, he highlights thirty descriptions of Jesus' majesty. Thirty different descriptions. It reveals eighteen eternal rewards. Jesus talks about eighteen eternal rewards. That is a remarkable number! There are quite a few eternal rewards in the Bible that we are meant to understand, to motivate us.

- C. Revelation chapters 1 and 19 contain two of the most glorious descriptions of Jesus in the Bible. They describe *who He is* (how He thinks and feels) and *what He does* in His end-time plan.
- D. Jesus will come *only* in the context of a prepared Bride walking in deep unity with the Spirit.

⁷For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. (Rev. 19:7)

Jesus is only going to return in context to a prepared church. The church will be a bride that has made herself ready by responding to Him. He is not coming for a backslidden church that is confused about what is going on, but for a church that is deeply rooted in the revelation of what is going on, which is in this book, the book of Revelation, although it is in the whole Word of God. He is coming back for a prepared bride. She understands what He is about, and she understands what is happening in that hour of history.

- E. We must understand Jesus' message to the seven churches. It is His instruction on what the overcoming Church looks like. In Revelation 1-3, we see truths that Jesus wants emphasized to prepare His Church to be used in the greatest revival in history—the end-time revival. He gives us a picture of what He wants in the Church and defines the quality of love and spiritual maturity that the Church will need to overcome in the face of great temptation and persecution.

We must understand Jesus' message to the seven churches. In other words, in Revelation 2-3 Jesus gives seven messages. It is really one overall message; you can look at it that way. It is His instruction on what the overcoming church looks like. We have seven short exhortations. This is what Jesus says the overcoming church looks like.

When we read Revelation 1-3, we see the truths that He wants emphasized to prepare His church for the greatest revival in history. Think about this. Revelation 1 is Jesus preparing the church. There are all kinds of church growth seminars and how to do church. In Revelation 1-3, Jesus says, "This is My church growth seminar right here." That sounds kind of cute, but it is real. It is easy to overlook these three chapters when we are seeking to build a church after God's own heart. As many of you are young leaders, I urge you to familiarize yourself with Revelation 1-3, so you do not get swept along with the tide of the culture that is deluding so much of the ministry that is in the visible church right now. So many that are involved in the church are being deluded and swept away by the tide of culture.

In Revelation 1-3, Jesus makes very clear, bold, definitive statements of what He wants in the church. I urge you to take it really seriously as future leaders in the church. These are the things the church needs to overcome—persecution and temptation. The church needs the truths of Revelation 1-3, so they do not yield in the face of temptation or persecution. Make it a goal to study these chapters often.

II. HOW TO APPLY THE 7 LETTERS: 4 WAYS

A. ***Individually:*** The letters were written to inspire wholeheartedness in individuals.

The first way that we apply the letters is individually, to inspire wholehearted obedience or wholehearted love, or you can say wholeheartedness. When I read these letters to the seven churches, and I take it personally, not just as a preacher for something to say, but wanting to understand it for my life, it inspires wholeheartedness.

B. ***Historically:*** The letters were first written to seven actual churches in John's generation to address their spiritual condition and to encourage them. Some see parallels of the spiritual conditions of the seven churches of Asia in the first century to the spiritual conditions of successive periods in church history. I am not sure this can be substantiated, but it is possible.

Then you can apply it historically. Jesus was actually talking to seven historical churches in the first century.

C. ***Universally:*** The letters were to benefit all churches throughout 2,000 years of church history. They were written to equip local churches to walk *corporately* in these truths together. Jesus spoke to individuals ("he" who has an ear), then applied it to a group ("churches").

⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev. 2:7)

Then we can apply it universally. These letters to these seven churches are beneficial to the whole body of Christ throughout history. Meaning, it is not only for the first century and not only for the end time generation. Written for all believers everywhere, these three chapters are meant to be understood by all.

D. ***Eschatologically:*** The letters are to prepare the end-time Church for the events of Revelation 6-19.

Eschatological, which just means end times. That is a fancy word for end times. The eschatological view is to use the letters to prepare the end time church for the events in the rest of the book. That is one of the things Jesus was doing. He was saying, "This is what you need to know to get ready for the events that are going to happen."

So these chapters are also to prepare the end time church for the events that unfold in the rest of the book. Forerunners who are church planters and are leaders in the body of Christ—you want to know these three chapters.

III. STUDYING THE 7 LETTERS: COMMON ELEMENTS

- A. ***Revelation of Jesus:*** Each message begins with Jesus highlighting specific aspects of His majesty that the churches needed to equip them to overcome persecution and specific temptations.

There are certain common elements in studying these seven letters. By the way, I am going through these seven letters so briefly.

First, Jesus calls attention to specific aspects of His own majesty to equip the people. Jesus reveals something about Himself that He wants highlighted in your life that will equip you. These are not just random things. They will equip you to stand in the face of persecution and in the face of temptation. The persecution today in our context in the western world is not physical at this point and time. I believe it will be at some time. The persecution today is reproach. We get laughed at or mocked. People in the body of Christ write you off. That is persecution. If you understand these different facets of Jesus, it will equip you to bear that reproach and not to back away quickly because some “cool” Christians think this is ridiculous. I find the book of Revelation is the most politically incorrect document on the planet, not may be, in the strictest sense. It is politically incorrect, this book. Even these things about the churches are not popular in the church today.

*Understanding them will actually bolster your boldness so you will not be tempted to back away because of reproach. You **will** bear reproach **if** you speak these truths. You will bear the reproach **in** the church as well as **outside** the church.*

- B. ***Historical context:*** it is important to gain information about the situation with which each church was challenged politically, economically, and spiritually. Jesus strategically selected these seven, knowing they would give prophetic insight into preparing the end-time Church.

The other common element to study is the historical context. There is a story behind each one of the churches.

- C. ***Affirmation for faithfulness:*** Jesus gave His affirmations before His corrections (Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira). Two churches received no affirmation (Sardis and Laodicea).

Jesus gives affirmation for faithfulness. He lets us know what He esteems. He is making a point to say. “This touches My heart, that you are being true to this.” This gives us insight into what moves His heart, into what He wants.

- D. ***Corrected for compromise:*** Jesus highlighted six temptations: immorality and idolatry (Rev. 2:14, 20), holding the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15), leaving their first love (Rev. 2:4), having a name of being spiritually alive but being spiritually dead (Rev. 3:1), and lukewarmness (Rev. 3:16). Two churches did not receive correction from Jesus (Smyrna and Philadelphia). The compromises He emphasized most were immorality, idolatry, and passivity.

Five of the seven churches are given corrections. These areas that He corrected are issues that are present in the church today. We do not want these areas in our own lives or in our ministries. If they are, we want to lay hold of the grace of God and the Word of God to correct these issues in our lives.

In these seven letters Jesus highlighted six temptations. Here are six specific temptations that He highlighted: Immorality and idolatry, very important. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans, leaving our first love, having a name

that we are spiritually alive when we are actually spiritually dead as born-again believers. It does not mean they are not born again. In terms of their everyday life, they are spiritually dull. Then lukewarmness.

Jesus emphasized three compromises the most. He said these over and over to these churches. He challenged them about immorality, He challenged them about idolatry, and He challenged them about spiritual passivity, about being lukewarm spiritually. That was the number one thing He corrected in three of the seven churches. They were very busy in ministry, but they were spiritually passive in their personal lives. Jesus appears to John in His resurrected body and says, “Tell three of the seven churches that in their individual lives that I want them to give themselves to Me in a more concentrated way. I love them with all of My heart. I want them to invest all of their heart in the relationship.” Three times He addresses spiritual passivity.

You can see the other issues in the church today. Idolatry—one of the biggest issues of idolatry according to Colossians 3 is covetousness. Paul said covetousness is idolatry. It is the love of money. Trusting in the power of things instead of seeing God as our source. These are the big issues in the church today.

- E. **Exhortation to respond:** Jesus gave actions that He required them to take, often with an element of warning. He warned them the most about *fear* (of persecution and rejection).

He gives an exhortation of how we should respond, what He wants us to do, and some action steps to take. Often there is an element of warning in these action items. The warning Jesus gave the most in the seven churches was against fear. He said a number of times, “Do not be afraid.” It was the fear of bearing reproach or persecution. Fear of having people not like you because you take a stand for morality, you take a stand for Jesus, you take a stand for what is on His heart. A lot of sincere believers get quiet and back away. Jesus said, “Do not do that.” Do not back away because you are bearing reproach or you are losing something in the sight of men, or from the fear of rejection, which is similar to persecution.

- F. **Promise for overcomers:** Jesus’ promises are an incentive for diligent faithfulness to Him—most will have their greatest fulfillment in the Millennium. Insight into them help equip us to stand in pressure. Jesus promised us 18 eternal rewards in Revelation 2-3 (2:7, 10, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

Another element is the promise to the overcomers. In all seven letters He pauses and gives a particular promise for them **if** they overcome the area they were being challenged in or exhorted to lay hold of. All seven churches were being challenged to avoid some things and exhorted to lay hold of some other things. If they obeyed, they had particular rewards associated with them obeying those particular exhortations.

1. Jesus taught on eternal rewards more than any other man in the Scripture. Here Jesus mentioned 18 rewards that equip His people to persevere by being anchored in eternity with confidence that our choices matter to such a degree that they will be rewarded.

As I mentioned before, there are eighteen eternal rewards listed in here. I love the subject of eternal rewards! I take it very, very personally. I see myself in context to these rewards. Meaning, they are not theological ideas that are just kind of neat and “let’s try to put the puzzle together and see what they mean.” I really want them! I want them for real! I want these specific rewards. I want to understand them, I ask the Holy Spirit, while searching the Word, “What do these mean?” I picture myself getting them. I tell you, it changes the way you spend time and money when you see yourself in the storyline of these rewards. It is not just kind of a vague concept in the book of Revelation. This is real. I really want that stone with my name written on it. I have a lot of ideas of what that might mean. My ideas may not be right, but I have ideas.

Rewards equip people to persevere. Not just persevere against persecution, but to persevere in obedience. To keep steady, to keep signing back up, to go wholeheartedly for the Lord. To persevere and keep pressing in, decade after decade. Rewards will help you do that.

Rewards are not the only thing to help us, but Jesus taught on rewards more than any other man in the Bible. Because when we see these rewards, our hearts get anchored in eternity, and we have confidence that our choices matter. Our hearts are anchored in eternity. When we see these rewards, and we see ourselves in the storyline of receiving these rewards, we get confidence that our choices matter. The way you spend time and money, what you do with your physical passions, what you do with your speech, what you do with your eyes really, really matters. How you respond to your enemies really does matter. It really does. When I have confidence that my choices matter, then I am motivated to make good ones.

When it is like, “Well, He does not even notice it, and nobody notices anyway; it did not really work. I chose this kind of hard thing against my flesh, and it did not get me anywhere.”

The Lord says, “It didn’t? Are you sure it didn’t? I remember it, and we will talk about it on the last day. That is good for you.” That is how the Lord will talk to His people. I am not claiming that is a conversation I actually had. That is the kind of stuff I believe He says.

2. Jesus was speaking to believers who had already received the free gift of salvation. He was calling believers to live in a way to receive heavenly rewards.
3. We receive salvation (justification) as a free gift, based on Jesus’ worthiness (Eph. 2:8-9). Heavenly rewards are given according to the works that we do as our response of love and gratitude to Jesus for giving us so great and free a salvation. There will be a difference in the measure of glory of each one’s reward (1 Cor. 15:41-42).

These rewards are given to believers. Some commentators, when you read their writings, make these rewards the automatic reward of every believer. So they are not really rewards corresponding to what Jesus said, “If you obey this, you get this reward.” They take it out of that arena of obedience, and they make them general things that are associated with salvation.

Jesus is not talking about the free gift of salvation. That is a free gift. He is talking about God’s response to our response as born-again believers. We are saved by faith as a free gift, but we are rewarded according to our works. Our works, our deeds, the things we do with love, faith, and obedience. He rewards works, but our salvation is a free gift by faith.

*Do not confuse those because for some people, works—like I mentioned legalism—is like a dirty word. Works are **critical**. You just do not want works to earn the love of God. The love of God is free. The salvation is free. **Your response to the love of God is works.** They move God’s heart and He remembers them forever. The money you give, the time you give, the energy you give, the serving. It matters. The cup of cold water is a work. Loving your enemy is a good work, and it really matters.*

- G. The exhortation that Jesus repeated the most in His earthly ministry was the call to have **ears to hear what the Spirit is saying**. This is written 16 times (8x in the gospels and 8x in Revelation: Mt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mk. 4:9, 23; 7:16; Lk. 8:8; 14:35; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9).

⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev. 2:7)

- H. “The angel to the church” refers to the apostolic leader over each church. The word *angel* is *angelos* in Greek. The word refers to an angelic or human messenger (Lk. 7:24, 27; 9:52). It was translated “messenger” when referring to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:10). The messenger’s responsibility was to guard the message and not let it be distorted through compromise, fear, or neglect.

If you have read this, you've seen that John is to give a message to the angel of each one of these churches. I believe the angel refers to the apostolic leader over that church in that city. The primary apostolic leader. That is the angel. The word, angel, can mean "a heavenly being," but it is the exact same word as "messenger." To the messenger of the church. I do not think John is having an angel give him a message and then John goes and gives that message to an angelic being over that city. I do not think that is what is happening. He is giving the messenger to a human being, a messenger, the "angel" of that church.

IV. EPHESUS: RETURNING TO OUR FIRST LOVE (REV. 2:1-7)

- A. The primary message: the church of Ephesus was affirmed for their diligent work and perseverance in standing for truth, but corrected for lacking love for Jesus in their labors.

¹To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands..." (Rev. 2:1)

Let's look at the seven churches. First is the church at Ephesus. Now, all seven of them are in what is modern-day Turkey today. We have a number of teams who have gone over to Turkey. They are in the territory of these seven churches. I believe that because of what God promised these churches 2000 years ago by the lips of Jesus, I think we are going to have a harvest in Turkey related to some of the things Jesus said here. I think Turkey that looks right now like a very barren field is going to be a harvest field for the gospel. A very, very powerful one before the Lord returns.

Ephesus was the third largest city in the ancient world. It was like the New York City of the western world. It was a very big, wealthy city. They had the greatest revival in terms of the number of people touched. It surpassed even Jerusalem. When you look at the book of Acts, first you see Jerusalem is the big revival. A few years later, in Acts 13, it is the city of Antioch. In Acts 19-20, it is Ephesus. That revival surpassed all the other ones in the early church.

Now it is a few decades after the great revival. Jesus says, "John, go and tell them in Ephesus that I have a few things to say to them. I see that they work hard. They are diligent, and they stand for the truth. They take a stand, and they take a hit for standing for the truth. It makes people upset, but tell them this—correct them for lacking love for Jesus. They do not love Me like they used to. Back in the revival several decades earlier, their first love was fresh and alive. They were serving Me because they loved Me. Now they are serving Me, but they are disconnected from Me." This is amazing. This is one of the most active, engaged, ministry-oriented churches in the Bible, but Jesus said, "They do not love Me the way they used to love Me. That troubles Me, John. Tell them that troubles Me because I love them. They are missing out on what I want with them, even in this age."

Jesus' revelation of Himself: He holds the seven stars and walks in the midst of His people. He holds, supports, directs, protects, and anoints His servants. He is deeply involved with His churches, protecting those who walk with Him as Adam walked with God in the Garden of Eden.

- B. Jesus affirmed their perseverance in their labor and standing for truth (v. 2, 6).

²I know your works, your labor, your patience [perseverance], and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars... (Rev. 2:2)

Jesus says, "I know your works." This is Jesus telling John to go tell the messenger or the apostolic leader of Ephesus, "Tell them I know your works." That is good. That is about your ministry. "I know your labor;" that

means your outreaches. “I know your patience.” Patience usually means perseverance. Sometimes you will read the word, *patience*, and you will think they are just being patient with one another. That is not what He is talking about. He is talking about not giving up when it is difficult.

“I know they cannot bear those who are evil.” That is remarkable. It is so popular in the church in many places to tolerate evil. Jesus is saying, “Those guys get troubled when something is wrong. I like that about them. They are not quiet when something is wrong.” I am talking about something major, not a minor wrong thing. He says, “They have tested those who say they are apostles who are not, and they found them to be liars. They have had ministries come through the city of Ephesus. They challenged them. I liked that they did that. That is good.”

- C. Jesus corrected them for neglect in cultivating their first love for God (v. 4). He exhorted them to remember, repent, and act in the ways that they had in their former days (v. 5). He promised them a place “in the midst” of the paradise in the New Jerusalem (v. 7).

⁴Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works...⁷To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. (Rev. 2:4-7)

“Nevertheless, I have this against you. You have left your first love. You do not love Me in the way you did in the early revival several decades earlier. This is what I want you to do.” This is Jesus speaking now. He is telling John to tell them, verse 5, “Remember from where you have fallen.” That is, “I want you to pause and I want you to take stock on how you used to relate to Me back in the early days. I want you to actually remember.” Because oftentimes people are on fire for the Lord for a few years, and then some more years go by. They look back and remember that fresh encounter with God, meaning when they were really interacting with God in a deep way on a regular basis. He says, in effect, “I want you to remember that, and I want your vision rekindled to do that again. Then I want you to repent for the things that you have done that caused you to lose that vision. I want you to remember about how we used to interact. Then I want you to do the things you did back then a couple decades ago.” He said, “I want you to remember, repent, and act.” He exhorted them to **remember**—remember the vision of how we interacted—**repent**—turn away from the way you are living now—and **act**—I actually want you to do the things you did then. Spend your time the same way, spend your money the same way. I want you to go back and do the things you did then.

“Well, I was just a young believer then.”

The Lord says, “Yeah, I know, but you were connecting with Me then. Now you have a successful ministry. I appreciate the work you are doing, but I want the interaction from the heart level in the way we used to have it in the early days.”

V. SMYRNA: FAITHFULNESS IN SUFFERING (REV. 2:8-11)

- A. The primary message: the church of Smyrna was called to continue to walk in the grace of fearlessness and faithfulness in persecution.

The church at Smyrna was called to the grace of fearlessness and faithfulness in persecution. Jesus gives them no correction through this entire letter. He affirms their fearlessness and their faithfulness in the face of persecution. He is saying, in effect, “You guys are remarkable.” The reason He shares these affirmations because it lets us know He is deeply moved by them taking a stand. He gives them no correction in this letter. He says, “You guys are doing great.”

- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: He is the First, the source of all blessing, and the Last in seeing the end of all things. Therefore He can assure us that all His promises will come to pass. As a man, He died and came to life. Having suffered when He was cruelly killed, He understood their suffering in persecution, but He had prevailed with power, knowing the way to full victory.

⁸**To the angel of the church in Smyna write, "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life..." (Rev. 2:8)**

Jesus reveals Himself as the First and the Last and as the one who was dead and came to life. The reason He called Himself the First and the Last—those are two different titles—and as the one who was dead who came to life, these three descriptions, because He is communicating these truths about Himself to help them to persevere, to have this grace of fearlessness and faithfulness in the face of persecution.

When He says, "I am the First," He is communicating, "I am the source of the blessings that your persecutors took from you." He is saying, "I am the source." "First" means "the source," as in "I am the fountain of everything good you had that the enemy has taken. Do not worry. I gave it to you. I am the source. The enemy is not the source. He is not the source. I am the source. You and I are doing great. Your blessing is secure. I will restore it in My way and in My timing, some in this age and fully in the age to come. Because I am the First, I am the source of it all. The enemy is the thief. He is not the source."

Some people get confused. When the enemy attacks through people, they think, "All is done. It's over!"

Jesus would say, "Wait, what do you mean 'all is done'? I am the one who gave you that blessing. Can't I give it to you again? I can restore anything I want."

*When He says, "I am the Last," He is communicating, "I see the end of all things from the beginning. Because I can see the end, there are no surprises. I can assure you My promises **will** come to pass. I see the end of everything. I see the end of the devil. He ends up in prison. The Antichrist gets thrown in the lake of fire. The whole system of sin is bankrupt. It is not going to work. My people are going to live in the glory of God. I can see the end of the matter. I am the source of the end."*

*Then He adds, "I was dead and came to life." What He is saying, in effect, "I suffered a cruel death. I suffered the process of a slow, cruel death." In other words, "I get what you are going through because I had a real body that was tortured. I know what you are going through. I walked through it. I am sympathetic. It moves Me what you are doing. I came back to life. Not only do I have sympathy and understanding of what you are going through, I triumphed over it. I have power over it. I not only have power over the thing that is attacking you, I know the way to victory. I know the way, **and** I have the power. I came back to life. You are talking to the right Man here. I am the Man who is going to make sure all of these things are restored to you."*

Nobody can steal anything from you in the will of God. They can hinder it in a very temporary way. Some people give the enemy so much credit. The enemy does not have the power to take anything. He who is the First and the Last, who died, He understands the process. He triumphed over death, and He came back. That is the one we are connected to. Every one of these titles has a whole lot in them to prepare the church to resist immorality, idolatry, and passivity, to resist temptation, to resist persecution, the fear of reproach, loss, etc.

- C. Jesus affirmed their love and perseverance in persecution (v. 9) and exhorted them not to fear (v. 10). He gave them no correction and promised them authority over the nations (v. 11).

⁹**I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)...¹⁰Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison...be**

faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life...¹¹ He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death. (Rev. 2:8-11)

VI. PERGAMOS: A CHURCH WITH COMPROMISE (REV. 2:12-17)

- A. The primary message: the church of Pergamos was affirmed for their faithfulness in not yielding to fear in persecution and called to refuse to yield to sin in the midst of a perverse culture. They were to stand up against Balaam's false teaching that allowed immorality and idolatrous feasts.

He encourages the church of Pergamos for their faithfulness, that they did not yield to fear in persecution. He says, "You are standing. Your lives are being risked, but you are standing. There is something I want you to do. I want you to come completely resist the perversion that is in your culture. Some of you are actually dying for the faith. You are an obedient church, but you are not taking the kind of stand I want you to against immorality and against idolatry. You are allowing compromise in your midst on that area, and you are not addressing it. I do see your faithfulness in other areas."

You would think a church where they are not only bearing reproach, but people are dying for the faith, you would think they would just be red hot on fire. They were, but He says, "There is this blind spot in your midst. You are soft on immorality and idolatry. I want you to take a stand against those things. I want you to do it in love, but I want you to be consistent in those things." These are the two big issues in the decades that are leading up to the Lord's return. No one knows when the Lord's return is, but every decade that goes by, these two issues are escalating, and it is getting more intense.. Not only these two. Idolatry, sorcery, covetousness, and the realm of immorality. All of its expressions of perversions will be dominating the planet. The body of Christ will walk in greater purity than any time in history in the face of these assaulting realities that are coming against the church. Determine in your heart that not only are you going to stand in these things, but you are going to walk in obedience and purity in these areas.

- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: He has the two-edged sword (v. 12). This emphasizes His zeal to intervene against the evil government of the Roman Empire as well as sin in the church. There are five references to Jesus' sword (Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21). Four times it refers to the sword of His mouth. When He speaks, the Spirit releases the sword of judgment on His enemies.

¹²To...the church in Pergamos write, "These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword..." (Rev. 2:12)

Jesus describes Himself saying, "I am the one who has the sharp sword." The description He gives and the reward He promises correspond to the challenge He gives them.

- C. Jesus affirmed their faithfulness in not yielding to fear in the midst of persecution (v. 13).

¹³I know your works...you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. (Rev. 2:13)

He says, "I know your works. I know you hold fast to My name. You are a good church, Pergamos. You hold fast." Can you imagine Jesus appearing or an angel appearing and saying, "O FCF, you hold fast to the name of the Lord."

Wouldn't that be awesome? Like, "Yes!"

Then He says, "But you are soft on immorality."

"What?"

“You have a blind spot. You are soft on that area, but you are staying steady about Me, and you are bearing reproach.”

I would be devastated. You would think how can one be true and the other be true too?

- D. He corrected their compromise in tolerating immorality and idolatry (v. 14). He exhorted them to repent (v. 16) and promised them hidden manna and a white stone (v. 17).

¹⁴But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught...to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality...

¹⁶Repent, or else I will...fight against them with the sword of My mouth...¹⁷To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it. (Rev. 2:14-17)

He corrected the compromise of tolerating immorality and idolatry. Verse 14, “There are a few things I have against you [as a local church] because you have those in your midst,” and they were leaders. They had to be leaders to have prominence enough for this to be characteristic of the church even in a small measure. “They hold to the doctrine of Balaam.”

Who is Balaam? Balaam is an Old Testament false prophet. You can read about Balaam in the book of Numbers. Here is what Balaam the false prophet taught. He taught people that it is okay to be involved in idolatry, and it is okay to be involved in immorality. As if he said, “Thus says the Lord by the Holy Spirit, it is okay; it is not a big deal.”

*Verse 16, Jesus says, “John, go tell them, the elders of that church, to repent of that lax attitude towards impurity.” Being zealous for purity is not talking about being mean about it and being rough on people. Some people think zeal means raising your voice and screaming at them and making them feel bad. That is not what zeal is. We are talking about a tender, compassionate, steady, faithful witness to help people renounce immorality in their life. It is not like you are **either lax on immorality or mean** about immorality. Those are not the only two options. There is a tender, godly approach that holds to God’s standards because it is the standard of **love**. Not because God is mean. It is like He is nice on everything. It’s not like He forgives people, but He has one little mean streak when it comes to sex. God invented sex. He does not have a little mean streak. He is fighting for love. He knows the only way we can walk in fullness is walk under His leadership in those areas as well.*

Verse 16, “Tell them to repent or I am going to fight against them with the sword of My mouth.”

What? Could you imagine Jesus fighting against our church? “In the name of Jesus I bind You.” You cannot bind Jesus in the name of Jesus.

Somebody says, “I didn’t even know Jesus ever fought people in His church.” He is fighting for love. He is fighting for their greatness. He is fighting for their wholeness. He loves them so much that He is going to intervene. A lot of folks in the church today do not have theology for Jesus talking this way. That is why we need these chapters. They are very, very important chapters. It is Jesus talking about church growth.

- E. Augustine said, “Lust yielded to becomes a habit, and a habit not resisted becomes necessity [addiction].”

VII. THYATIRA: COMMITTED, YET TOLERATING IMMORALITY (REV. 2:18-29)

- A. The primary message: the church of Thyatira was commended for their love and ministry, but warned not to tolerate Jezebel who promoted immorality and idolatry.

Thyatira had the same problem as Pergamos;. It was just a few miles down the road.

- B. Jesus' revelation of Himself: the Son of God with eyes of fire and feet like brass. Being the Son of God emphasizes His deity and power to withstand Jezebel. His eyes being like fire speak of His love for His people and His judgment, or zeal to remove all that hinders love. His feet like brass speak of judgment against sin. He promises to tread down all that is identified with Jezebel.

¹⁸To...the church in Thyatira write, "These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass..." (Rev. 2:18)

Jesus says, "I am the Son of God. I have eyes like a flame of fire, and My feet are like brass." Verse 18. He is telling them, "I want you to confront"—it is not Balaam in this city—it is Jezebel. It is not the Old Testament Jezebel. That is another Jezebel. This was a first century woman who was a prophetess in the church. She was accepted in the church in her teaching ministry, but she was very lax on immorality.

She taught, "Well, you know, that is not the really big issue. What God is really into is this, this, and this, and immorality is not the point." I can hear that tone coming through the body of Christ in the western world today. It is the spirit of Jezebel. At the end of the day, the spirit of Jezebel, if you want to use that term, is not a woman.

A lot of folks say the spirit of Jezebel is a woman with a control spirit. I say, "No, it is not a woman who needs more people skills. That is not what we are talking about." The spirit of Jezebel is seduction and immorality. More men have the spirit of Jezebel on them than women do. Men are actually more seductive than women are, but they just do it in a different way. They seduce with their power, their money, and the manipulation, and all kinds of things. That is the spirit of Jezebel. The spirit of Jezebel is entrenched in the media industry, in our culture, it is flashing across the televisions all across the world. The spirit of Jezebel. It is not a woman who needs some help on her people skills. That is not what the spirit of Jezebel really is.

- C. Jesus releases either the *fire of grace* or the *fire of judgment*, depending on how His people respond to His leadership.

Jesus says, "I am going to look with My eyes of fire—it is going to be the fire of grace to liberate you or the fire of judgment," depending on how His people respond. He says, "I have eyes of fire. My fiery eyes—that is love—it is love that is so pure that I will intervene with My fire. It can be the fire of grace to liberate and empower or it can be the fire of judgment because you have resisted Me. Tell them My eyes have fire in them on this issue." The fire of grace or fire of judgment depending on how His people respond to His leadership.

What is going on today in the cultural wars, and the incredible confusion that is happening in the whole arena of sexuality and the gay agenda and the heterosexual immorality and the pornography world—it is not just the gay agenda. It is the heterosexual agenda as well. There is so much that is happening that is bringing so much defilement to our culture from the biblical point of view. The only view that I take, as a definition of what defilement is and what defilement is not, is the Biblical view. The Lord says, "I want My people with tenderness and love. I want them to show My way so they can take a stand and not yield to the cultural pressures that are common in that day."

D. Jesus affirmed their ministry, love, service, faith, and perseverance in persecution (v. 19).

¹⁹I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience [perseverance]... (Rev. 2:19)

“I know your works,” verse 19. Jesus says, “I know your works. You have a really thriving ministry. Your works. I know your love. You really love people. I get it. I see your love. It is real. I see your love for Me. I see your service. You are giving to the poor. You are helping people in need. I see your faith. You are staying steady under persecution and opposition. I see your perseverance under reproach.”

What more would you want Jesus to say to your church? You have good works, you have love, faith, good service, persevering. Wow, verse 19, “Lord, I want to hear verse 19.”

E. He corrected their toleration of idolatry and immorality—lacking in moral purity—(v. 20) and warned of His discipline (v. 21-23). To overcomers, He promised power over the nations (v. 26).

²⁰Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow [tolerate] that woman Jezebel... to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality...²¹I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. ²²I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent...²³I will kill her children with death...²⁶He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations... (Rev. 2:20-26)

“Nevertheless,” verse 20.

“Uh, uh, uh. I do not want to hear ‘nevertheless.’”

*“I have a few things against you. There is so much I have for you.” He only has this against them because He loves this church so much. He says, “Because you allow,” and some translations use the word **tolerate**. I want to use the word **tolerate** because **toleration** is the number one value of the humanistic culture. They do not care if something is true or false, as long as it is permissible. As long as it is permissible, that is the value of the culture that we are all in right now.*

My point is not how bad that is. It is bad. That is not my point. My point is, I want us to gird ourselves to give a witness faithfully to the truth with our love, with our lives, with our deeds, and to be an expression of the glory of God in the midst of this tolerance.

There is one definition of tolerance that is very, very good. When it means giving people the dignity and value that is inherently theirs because they are human, regardless what they are doing, that kind of tolerance is good. When the fact they are human makes them valuable, that tolerance is good. But tolerance can shift over from human dignity to tolerating all kinds of other things. That is not good.

The Lord says, “I want you to do this. Here is what I want you to do. I want you to take a stand against this woman Jezebel. She is seducing people, and she is teaching people that immorality is okay.”

Here is the biblical definition of immorality. It is any sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. That is the Biblical definition of sexuality. Some folks are talking a lot about the gay agenda. I appreciate that actually, but I am not as interested particularly in the gay agenda. I am, I really am, but there is so much heterosexual activity. There is so much more of that in the church. I want to address that. Not just the homosexual immorality, but how about the heterosexual immorality. It is because of love. He is saying, “Do not tolerate it because I love you.” That is the spirit of what He is talking about here.

He says, “This woman is seducing.” It is her teaching that is seducing people. It is not like she is getting everybody in a corner and personally seducing each one in a personal way. Her teaching seduces them. That is what is going on in our culture. The teaching and rhetoric is seducing the church today.

He says, verse 21, “I gave her time to repent. She did not.” Verse 22, “I will cast her on a sickbed. I, the Lord, will make her sick.”

“Wait, Jesus cannot make somebody sick!”

Well, He said He would right here. “Those who commit adultery with her”—those who partake of her lax spirit of immorality—“I will cast them into trouble in their life”—to wake them up. I want to wake them up because I love them. Verse 23, “I will kill her children with death.” This is Jesus talking. Again, we cannot use the name of Jesus to bind verse 23. It is not going to work. There are several levels of application to what this means. Really intense.

- F. Believers are sometimes made sick and even die under God’s judgment. God’s discipline includes Satan being permitted to make the unrepentant sick (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 11:30-32).

³⁰**For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [died].**

³¹**If we...judge ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are chastened [disciplined] by the Lord, that we may not be condemned [go to hell] with the world. (1 Cor. 11:30-32)**

¹**It is reported that there is sexual immorality among you...⁵deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord... (1 Cor. 5:1-5)**

VIII. SARDIS: REPUTATION WITHOUT SPIRITUAL SUBSTANCE (REV. 3:1-6)

- A. The primary message: the church of Sardis was called to repent of their spiritual passivity.

Sardis has a reputation of being spiritual, but they do not have substance.

- B. Jesus’ revelation of Himself: He has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars. He will release the seven-fold diverse ministries of the Spirit to them (Isa. 11:2) and will hold His people in His hands, which speaks of being deeply involved in their life and ministry.

¹**To the angel of the church in Sardis write, “These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...” (Rev. 3:1)**

- C. Jesus gave them no affirmation, but corrected their spiritual passivity and lukewarmness (v. 1). They had a reputation of being spiritually alive, but lacked a sense of the Spirit’s presence and inspiration in their life. He exhorted them to be watchful and strengthen the things that remained (v. 2) as they remembered and repented (v. 3). He promised them white garments, that He would not blot their names out of the book of life, and that He would confess them before the Father (v. 5).

¹**I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. ²Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain...³Remember how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent...⁵He 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...” (Rev. 3:1-5)**

Jesus says of them, “I know your works. You have a name that you are alive, but really you are spiritually dead.” That does not mean they are not born again. It means they are dull. They are dead in their everyday

maintaining of their relationship with the Lord. Their hearts are spiritually dull. It is not talking about in the sense where they are not born again. He is talking to the true church.

Verse 3, “Remember how you received and heard.” That is the same thing He told the church at Ephesus back in chapter 2. “Remember how it used to be. Remember how you first heard from Me. Remember how you heard My heart through the Word. Remember the things that excited you in your early days. I want you to repent.” This is the same thing He told the church at Ephesus, the first church back in chapter 2. Jesus gave this church no affirmation, but He corrected their spiritual passivity. He corrected their spiritual passivity.

IX. PHILADELPHIA: FAITHFULNESS UNTO ETERNAL REWARDS (REV. 3:7-13)

- A. The primary message: the church of Philadelphia was affirmed for their faithfulness to Jesus.
- B. Jesus’ revelation of Himself: He who is holy and true and who has the key of David. Jesus is holy or transcendent (infinitely superior to all). Thus He is worth whatever it costs to love and obey Him. He is true, reliable in His extravagant promises (Rev. 3:12). He has the key of David, which includes being the heir of all the promises that God gave David, having great authority.
- ⁷To...the church in **Philadelphia** write, “These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts...” (Rev. 3:7)*

- C. Jesus affirmed their faithfulness to obey in the face of temptation and great persecution (v. 8). He gave them no correction, but exhorted them to hold fast, to continue to persevere (v. 11). He promised to make them a pillar in God’s temple and to write on them God’s name (v. 12).
- ⁸I know your works...for you...have kept My word, and have not denied My name...¹¹Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. ¹²He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God...and I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem... (Rev. 3:8-12)*

Philadelphia has no rebuke. This is the most amazing church. Verse 12, the reward He gives to Philadelphia tells you how far God is willing to go with someone who is obedient. He gives the most amazing promises. It shows how moved He is and how far God will go with people who are obedient, individuals, and also as a collective group of people together. That is amazing, but that is for another time.

X. LAODICEA: SPIRITUAL PRIDE AND LUKEWARMNESS (REV. 3:14-22)

- A. The primary message: the church of Laodicea was promised deeper fellowship with God and authority in His eternal kingdom if they zealously repented of their lukewarmness.
- He promises Laodicea a deeper relationship with God, a deeper connection with God. Deeper fellowship with God is what He promises them, and He promises them a position of authority in the eternal kingdom. Laodicea has the worst description, but they get the greatest promise.*
- B. Jesus’ revelation of Himself: He is the Amen because His promises are sure, and the Faithful Witness because what He speaks is reliable as He revealed their failures (v. 15-17) and promises (v. 20-21). He is the beginning of creation, being the *First Cause* and having all authority over it.
- ¹⁴To the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God...” (Rev. 3:14)*

- C. Jesus gave them no affirmation for their faithfulness. He corrected their lukewarmness and spiritual pride (v. 15-17). He exhorted them to buy gold refined by fire (v. 18) and promised them deep fellowship with God and authority over the nations (v. 20-21).

¹⁶...because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

¹⁷Because 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...¹⁹be zealous and repent. ²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone...opens the door, I will come in to him...²¹To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne..." (Rev. 3:16-21)

Verse 16, you know the verse, "You are lukewarm. You are not hot or cold. I will vomit you out of My mouth." That does not mean they are repulsive to Jesus. What He is saying is, "You make My stomach hurt. Because I love you so much, My stomach hurts when I see the way you live." Some people see "vomit" and think Jesus is repulsed with His people. Not so.

Verse 17, "You say, 'I am rich, I am wealthy, I do not need anything,' but you do not know..." Jesus knows who they are in Christ. He is talking not about their legal position here. He is talking about their everyday living condition. He says, "You are wretched, you are poor, you are blind, you are naked." That is, "Your everyday condition of how you relate to Me is horrible. Even though you have all things in Christ, our relationship is deficient in a very, very grievous way."

Verse 21 gives the greatest promise. This is just incredible. He says, "If you will overcome..." Overcome what? The passivity. He is not talking about immorality or idolatry here. He is talking about their spiritual dullness. "If you will overcome it, I will cause you to sit with Me on My throne in the age to come."

"What?"

"I am so committed to you loving Me. If you will overcome this issue"—again, it is not immorality, it is not idolatry—"this passive, casual, lackadaisical approach to relationship with Me, where you do not love Me with all of your heart and strength. You are casual about Me. If you will change that, you will sit on My throne with Me." That does not mean everybody will sit on one chair so to speak. He is saying, "In the extension of My authority in the Millennial Kingdom, you will be on a throne." That is how strongly He feels about passivity.

As a matter of fact, Jesus talked more about passivity than idolatry or immorality. Passivity is the one sin in the seven churches that goes unchecked in the body of Christ. It easily goes unchecked. You cannot really measure passivity. You cannot get a bottle of it. You cannot take a picture of it. You do not quite know if you have it or not. That is the area that He challenged the most, even more than immorality. That is remarkable to me. Amen and amen.