

JESUS' LETTER TO THE CHURCHES

Text: Revelation 2–3

Theme: For the glory of God, Jesus charges the church to be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a manner that reflects the gospel.

Introduction – A letter from Jesus to Albion EFC

- imagine receiving such a letter from our Savior—what would it say to us?
- there He is: the Resurrected, Glorified Christ, reigning from heaven on high, writing to us
- what would He say? Would He commend us on our strengths as a church?
- would He need to correct or reprove us for weaknesses, things neglected, omitted?
- or would we be so overcome at His description of Himself: in glory, powerful, sovereign
- perhaps He might include something about our immediate future: 1–2 years at most
- and how would we respond to His promise of reward if we take Him at His word?

I think we'd all want to hear and obey what Jesus would say to us.

This kind of hope helps expose...

I. OUR GREATEST NEED

- some might think our great need would be to implement methods to make us impressive
- the world is watching, by the way, and they want to see what we can do to draw them
- do we have bigger & bigger crowds?
- are we thinking of upgrading our building...or better yet, building a new, shiny one
- you know the kind: huge foyer, coffee bar, maybe even serving donuts & pastries
- we'd have chairs, no pews, huge flat screens all over, and programs galore!
- oh, how they'd love for us to boast about being a super-mega-big-box-provide-it-all church
- but that's not really our greatest need, is it?
- the greatest need of a local church—of Albion Evangelical Free Church—is to be faithful
- be faithful to Jesus Christ, hold fast to the gospel, to live lives that are pleasing to God
- if we see that as our greatest need above all things, God's promised blessing will rest upon us
- and that need is achievable because God has given us everything we need
- in this book (hold up Bible), He's given us His great & precious promises
- and this will enable us, as a church, to live a life of godliness

And this is the main point today, and of these seven addresses to seven churches

- Jesus charges us to be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a manner that corresponds to the gospel, all for God's glory
- Jesus IS the gospel, so we must never lose our fervency for Him
- false teaching is always around us, so we learn to discern it and reject it
- God has told us to be holy as He is holy; we do this thru Jesus Christ
- and to go hard after holiness is most pleasing to our heavenly Father

To do this, we must remember the injunction from ch. 1, v. 3:

II. READ IT, HEAR IT, OBEY IT

- the blessing is promised of God: *"Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near."*
- each of the seven churches would have done just this
- someone would have read it to the whole congregation
- and not just their specific letter; the entire letter from John of the revelation of Jesus Christ
- and then...consider this: each would hear the other churches' letters read out loud
- and they would each hear yours

- in this manner, each church would know they all needed to read this letter
- but beyond the basic reading, they would need to take heed to it all...and live it out
- God would be glorified as these churches would obey Jesus' charge to be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a manner consistent with the gospel
- and as we read this, we must do the same
- for Jesus speaks in such a way, John writes in such a way, that we must hear & heed this
- note carefully: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...plural
- God is speaking to His church in all ages in this letter to the seven churches
- they represent us in so many ways, and sadly in too many ways as well
- so, we too, must heed and hear Jesus speaking to us

Now, let's consider the...

III. THE PICTURE IN THE FRAME

- let me start by explaining why I'm doing a quick overview of these seven letters first
 - Lord willing, next Lord's Day, we'll dive in to each individual church & her address
 - in between times of shoveling & moving snow, I read & studied these letters
 - in my reading, I realized that for many years, I've simply viewed Jesus' words separately
 - I wouldn't be surprised we've all only seen each church individually
 - but James Hamilton, a pastor who passed several years ago, pointed out something amazing
 - he revealed how, by looking at them all together, you can see the theme of Revelation shining
 - let me show you the pattern he saw, then show how it fits so remarkably
 - Hamilton used the analogy of a wooden picture frame
 - [go thru points on slide]
 - Ephesus would be one side of the wooden frame
 - this church has lost its first love
 - next is Smyrna, commended for its faithfulness in midst of extreme suffering
 - there is no reproof or call to repent
 - this is one side of the mat
 - then comes Pergamum, who has people who hold to false teaching, eat food sacrificed to idols, and practice sexual immorality: this is the right-hand side of the picture in our frame
 - in the middle of the picture is Thyatira, which is worse than Pergamum
 - they have a false prophetess they listen to
 - she leads them into idolatry, sexual immorality & they are unrepentant
 - the left-hand side of the picture in this frame is Sardis, worse than Pergamum & Thyatira
 - Jesus says this church is dead, a horrible state
 - on the left-side of the mat is Philadelphia, like Smyrna: faithful, enduring
 - she also receives no reproof or call to repent
 - finally, on the other side of the frame is Laodicea, corresponding to Ephesus
 - Laodicea, as most of us know, has also lost her first love & is lukewarm
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- only two out of seven are not reproved
 - John, the last of the apostles, is still alive and the church is already in this condition overall
 - I hope you realize that we have not evolved as churches; we're so like them today
 - but do not give into discouragement or despair
 - Jesus loved these churches enough to reprove and discipline them; He'll do the same today
 - healthy churches are truly in the minority, then and now
 - but Jesus continues to build His church
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- so, see the pattern: first & last churches are complacent, which Jesus cannot have

- Jesus wants Ephesus to return to her first love & Laodicea to be zealous & repent
- the three middle churches go from bad to worse
- Pergamum tolerates false teaching, which, as ancient Israel under Balaam's influence had
- they gave into idolatry (eating food sacrificed to idols) & sexual immorality
- but Pergamum hasn't gone quite that far...yet; but if not repentant, they will
- this is so because we see it happening in Thyatira
- the false prophetess was accepted and the people of the church gave in to grave sins
- but just when you think that's as bad as it can get, we come to Sardis
- this is where false teaching leads: the death of a church
- for the glory of God, Jesus calls these churches to reject false teaching
- He longs for them to hold fast to the gospel truth
- then, and only then, can they live in a way that is consistent with the gospel
- I wonder how we're doing by comparison?
- is our love for God & for one another still flaming hot & bright?
- or are we growing lukewarm?
- are we ready to be faithful unto death like those in Smyrna?
- will we hold fast & not deny the name of Jesus like Philadelphia?
- where are we? It's a great question for evaluation as we move quickly into this new year
- one key matter to consider, before we move on is this: Look at what Jesus has promised
- "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" (Rev 2.23)
- Jesus is going to make Himself known
- He, and He alone is worthy of our patiently enduring whatever this world throws at us
- walking in purity, avoiding sexual immorality of both spiritual & physical kinds is hard
- He is worthy of our singular devotion, which keeps us from idolatry
- and He will repay us with greater pleasures & rewards than anything sin or world offers
- so, we need to hear His words in 2.5: "Repent!"
- and in 2.16: "Repent!"
- and again in 2.22: "Repent!"
- then get ready for 3.3: "Repent!"
- and last, but not least, 3.19: "Repent!"
- Jesus charges us, as one of His churches, to be zealous for the gospel
- He longs for us to reject false teaching & live in manner in harmony with the gospel

Well, now let's think hard about...

IV. THE IMAGE WE SHOULD SEE

- think about the opening of this letter in 1.1–8: we see the glory of God revealed in Christ
- then, John, in 1.9–20, sees the glorified resurrected Christ in all the radiant glory that is His
- we must understand ch. 1 to understand ch. 2 & 3
- Jesus identifies Himself in ways that John described Him in ch. 1
- and this is the vision that should capture our attention wholeheartedly
- as Jesus introduces Himself in these ways & specifically to each church, He does a wonder
- He proclaims His own matchless glory & authority, announcing the truth of the Gospel

- if we look at each individual church and see only behavioral modification, we miss it all
- yes, 5 of 7 churches need to change their behavior
- but can only do so by seeing this glorious, majestic, risen, reigning Lord of all things

- look at this: Jesus holds the seven stars & walks among the lampstands
- this tells us that He is in control of each of His churches
- if we do not repent of sin of any kind, He will come & remove that lampstand He controls

- in 2.8, we see that He is the “first and the last”
- we’ve already seen this tells us that Jesus is God, not some highly created being
- because He died and came to life, He can call us to be faithful unto death, like Smyrna

- He warns Pergamum, with the “sharp two-edged sword” from His mouth
- this sword will be used for judgment if they fail to repent of their sins

- Thyatira sees His “eyes like a flame of fire” which search hearts & minds
- His feet, burnished like bronze” point to His absolute purity
- by His very being, He calls us to this life of holiness, godliness, and purity

- the “seven spirits of God” tell of the very Holy Spirit of God
- only by the Spirit can Sardis be brought to life from her spiritual deadness
- they must have the Holy Spirit wake them up, strengthen them, and help them remember

- then think of the great encouragement that comes to Philadelphia
- Jesus has the “key of David”; only He can open and close
- no one else has this authority but the risen and reigning Christ

- to Laodicea, Jesus is the “Amen, the faithful and true witness” (3.14)
- His word is to be believed, therefore Laodicea should do what He counsels them to do
- only by believing His witness can their shame be covered

- this is our Lord Jesus Christ
- when we look upon Him, even as these seven churches did through John, we see His glory
- He is God, He died and rose again, His word is to be believed by power of Holy Spirit
- believing His word will cover our shame, the forgiveness of our sins

- I wonder if there are still some of you who do not yet believe...why not?
- what holds you back? Your self-centeredness, thinking you can get by on your own?
- or maybe it’s that you’ve fallen in love with things of this world
- you can’t imagine that Jesus can possibly bring you more delight than sex or money or anything
- remember this: He is the One who searches hearts & minds—as He says: He knows!
- the One who will speak decisive judgment will decide your eternal destiny, not you
- your only hope is to trust Him
- and He deserves your trust for He is faithful & true
- He will never disappoint you...trust Him today!

- and what about you who believe?
- do you rejoice and delight in the image of Jesus given us here in these seven addresses?
- is your heart zealous, committed, given over wholly to the gospel truth?

- are you striving to hold fast to solid truth & avoid false teaching of any kind?
- is your life reflective of His holiness that shines so brightly in the gospel?
- let it be so for us as an entire church, not just a few of us

CONCLUSION – How to bring glory to God as a church

- this entire letter—the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ— shows off His majestic glory
- these letters point to that and call us to that
- at the end of the first three letters we hear this:
 - He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches”
 - this comes before the promise: “To the one who conquers”
- the last four, the promise is made before the statement about hearing His words
- the reversal of order makes the call to hear the Spirit the final call to all seven churches

These letters begin with the gospel & greatness of Jesus Christ

- He calls us to reject false teaching & live in a way that dovetails with the gospel
- astonishing rewards are promised by our Lord & Savior
- and all this includes us today, 1,900 years later

So, here is the call on this second Lord’s Day of 2023:

- let us pursue the steadfast faithfulness to the gospel
- let us be diligent about sound doctrine, so we can discern truth from what is false
- let us live in pure devotion to Jesus, avoiding idolatry of any kind, as well as immorality

For the glory of God, Jesus charges the churches to be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a manner that corresponds to the gospel

- may He be pleased to lead us in this way this year and beyond