

Letters to Philadelphia and Laodicea

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Happy Palm Sunday. This is the beginning of an amazing week. It's my favorite time of the year.

So if you're just joining us for the first time, we hope you keep coming, at least for the next week, because there's a journey that we're on right now where we're following in the footsteps of Jesus. And so we step out of our ordinary sense of time, and we inhabit this story together, this timeless story. And as we do this, the past, the present, and the future are drawn together.

So the events over these next few weeks connect us to all of history, all that has been, all that will be. We're also in a series looking at the final book of the Bible, what we call Revelation, the Revelation of St. John.

And we're looking at it during the season of Lent in preparation for Easter, because in the first part of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, we see the only place in the Bible where you have letters that are written directly by Jesus to his church.

[1 : 08] And these are, in many ways, Jesus' final words to his church. This is not the Jesus who entered Jerusalem on a donkey, though. This is the triumphant, risen Christ.

And these are his words to his bride. To prepare us for all that is to come until he comes again. And so we're looking at these letters. We're going to look at the last two letters together today.

The letter to Philadelphia, the church in Philadelphia, and the letter to the church in Laodicea. It's actually in the Greek Laodicea, but a lot of people say Laodicea, so that's what I'm going to say. And we're going to look at them together, because when we compare and contrast these two letters, there are some themes that emerge that I think speak to us as this church family in a city like D.C.

in the time and place that God has allotted for us. And so let's pray. And what we're going to do is look at the letters together, and then we're going to look at a couple of implications for us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

And we thank you that every week we get to come and we get to sit under your word. And that you promise to speak to us through this word in a way that you don't through any other medium.

[2 : 20] That this word is unique in that you enliven it and empower it and speak through it to your people. And that's what we most need, Lord, is your presence and your voice, as much as we need your flesh and your blood.

And it's in your son's name that we pray. Amen. So we're going to look at two churches and we're going to compare them a little bit. The first letter that we see is the letter from Jesus via John to the letter in Philadelphia.

Now let me tell you a little bit about the church in Philadelphia. The church in Philadelphia is that little storefront church that you pass on the way to the grocery store. It's right there in the strip mall, and it's kind of nestled in there, and there's a nail salon on one side and a rite aid on the other. And if you're totally honest, you had lived in the neighborhood for a little over three years before you even knew the church was there because you were just driving past it every day. It has a sign, but it's kind of broken.

Most of the letters are missing. You didn't even know it was a church. And yet here's what Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia. He says in verse 8, He says, I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

[3 : 38] The power brokers in Philadelphia, the influencers, the decision makers, the social gatekeepers, what he describes as Jews who are not actually Jews, they had summarily rejected Jesus and his followers.

And so what had likely happened is these Christians had tried to go into the synagogues, and they had been rejected. They had been kicked out. And they did not have reputation in Philadelphia. They did not have, they were not welcomed there. They had been treated probably with overt hostility. And so Jesus is saying to these people, He says, I know that you were rejected from the synagogues.

I know that the kind of influential who's who of Philadelphia, they've excluded you. But I'm the true gatekeeper. And he introduces himself as the one who holds the keys of David.

I'm the one who ultimately decides who is welcome into the kingdom and who is left out in the dark. I'm the doorkeeper. And there was a position in this time, the doorkeeper was a very authoritative position at the royal palace.

[4 : 44] It was the person who decided who gained entry. And Jesus is saying, I'm that person. And so Jesus is the one, not the leaders of the synagogues, who decides who gets sent. And so Jesus is saying to these Christians who've been rejected, He says, when I come, not only am I going to welcome you into the temple, but I'm actually going to build you into the architecture of the true temple.

You will be pillars in the true temple. And never will you be sent out again. Never will anyone reject you again. Because you'll be part of the very foundation of the new temple that I'm building in the world.

This is an amazing promise that he gives to the Philadelphian Christians. And he says, all of those who rejected you because of your faith will one day bow at your feet. Now he's not saying that they're going to be worshipped.

What he's saying is, is that when you are welcomed into the kingdom of God, when you are made a saint, through the grace of Jesus Christ, that you are the new temple. And that where you stand, that is holy ground because that is where the temple stands.

And so as they used to come and bow and worship at the temple, so they will come and recognize that you are part of the true temple. It's an amazing image, an amazing promise. So this is what he says to the Philadelphian Christians, hold fast to me, hold fast to Christ, until I come again.

[6 : 02] Now compare this with the Laodicean letter. Let's talk a little bit about the church in Laodicea. The church in Laodicea, you can't miss it because it spans about four city blocks. When you roll up to the church in Laodicea, you're met by the valet staff.

And they valet park your car. And they give you a ticket. And as you're putting the ticket into your pocket, a guest experience coordinator meets you at the door. And they lead you in to the north lobby because that's where the newcomers enter.

And so you go into the north lobby and the guest experience coordinator then whisks your children off to the East Wing Amusement Park. You're not going to see them for at least two hours. Okay, they're gone. You're invited instead to go to the in-house coffee shop and to order a latte that's custom made by the barista who used to work at Starbucks corporate before he found Jesus.

And now he's here. And then you have a little time to spare. And so you go into the bookstore to browse the merch. And you're looking at a pair of sneakers with the church logo on it.

And then you begin to notice that the top of your coffee is rippling. And that can only mean one thing, that the worship band has taken the stage. So it's time. It's all in the commentaries. It's time to go into worship.

[7 : 11] So Laodicea is a very different place. And yet here's what Jesus says. Revelation 3.15. Now what's he talking about there?

Well, on the surface we know what he's getting at. But there are some references here that help give us context. In Laodicea, it was very common to complain about the water.

And the reason is because where they were located, they had no direct access to a water supply. They had to pipe all of their water in from the south. And so their neighbors on one side lived in the mountains.

And they had cold mountain water that came right up out of the ground. And so they had access to cold, refreshing water. Their neighbors on the other side in Hierapolis had hot springs.

And of course, hot water is great for bathing and washing and relaxing. Laodicea had neither. They were piping their water in. And by the time it reached the city, it was lukewarm and it was filled with silt.

[8 : 20] Lots of lime deposits. And so it was very common in Laodicea to hear people complain about the quality of the water. And so Jesus is saying, Hey, you know that water that you complain

about all the time, that you love to just go and just moan about?

That's you. He says, just like you spit the water out on the ground and complain, One day I'm going to spit you out on the ground. And the word that he uses can be translated vomit.

One day I'm going to vomit you out on the ground. And so this for the people in Laodicea would come as a huge kick in the stomach. And he says this for verse 17. For you say, There's tons of irony here.

The Laodicean church was very wealthy. Laodicea as a community was very wealthy. And yet he's saying, You have no idea how poor you are. You need the gold that is refined by fire.

So come to me. Get the gold that I provide. Get the wealth that I provide. And then you'll be rich.

The Laodiceans were also famous for their textile industry. And get this.

[9 : 52] In particular, they were famous for the black wool that they used to create cloth and carpets. So Laodicean textiles were famous for being very dark in color and very well made.

They made a lot of money from that. And Jesus says, You're so proud of your clothing. You're so proud of your textiles. You're naked. You're pitiable. Come to me and get white garments.

And cover your shame. And then he says to these Laodiceans, They had a famous eye doctor that was well known in the ancient world. They actually had a first century medical school in Laodicea.

And they produced an eye salve that was reputed to be able to improve eyesight or even sometimes cure blindness if the gods had mercy on you. And yet he's saying to these people, You have no idea how blind you are.

None of you can see. You're all blind. Don't trust the salve that you're famous for. Come to me. I'll give you a salve that will actually allow you to be able to see.

[10 : 57] And so Jesus is striking at the very heart of the pride of the Laodiceans. And, you know, we hear this. And in case anyone thinks that Jesus has just had enough, you know, and he's just finally letting loose, he reminds us why he's being so harsh with them.

He says in verse 19, he says, Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline. So he's saying, you know, these are hard words. And sometimes if you love somebody, sometimes if you really care about somebody, you have to say hard things to them.

And he says, I'm saying this because I love you. Please repent. Please turn back. You know, Kevin gave a great explanation last week for what repentance actually means.

Turn around. Go the other way. Be zealous and repent. And he says, if you repent, I promise that one day you're going to share my throne. And one day we're going to eat together at the supper of the Lamb.

So he says, instead of spitting out silty, nasty water, we're going to be feasting together. And so in all of these ways, we can contrast Philadelphia and Laodicea.

[12 : 05] I just want to draw out a couple of contrasts. Look at Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, Jesus offers no rebuke, just words of praise and encouragement.

But in Laodicea, he offers no words of praise and encouragement, only rebuke. And if you look at Philadelphia, he says they're clinging to Christ even though they have no wealth, no influence.

They're clinging to Christ. They've got nothing in terms of social or cultural capital, but they have Christ. And by contrast, in Laodicea, they are clinging to their wealth and their status and their influence, but in doing so, they have lost hold of Christ.

And then finally, in Philadelphia, Jesus opens a door in Philadelphia, this little storefront church that you always pass on your way to the grocery store. Jesus has opened a door there where many will enter the kingdom of God.

You're the door, he says. I've opened it. And nobody can shut it. Nobody. Nobody. Nobody can rob you of the spiritual power that I've given you. Many will come to the kingdom through you.

[13 : 12] And yet in Laodicea, what's the situation? The door's shut. And to make matters worse, Jesus is the one who's locked out. And Jesus says, I stand at the door and knock.

Not only am I not opening a door in you, but you've shut the door on me. You shut it in my face. And so there's a huge world of difference between these two churches. And so to come back to our original question, when we look at these words, what does Jesus desire for his church in a world like ours?

What does he desire for our church family being in a place like D.C. in a time such as this? And there's a couple of things that I think we can draw out of this that may apply.

The first implication is this, that this is leading us to consider what it means to have faithfulness in the midst of materialism.

The church in general, but also our church, what does faithfulness look like in a culture of incredible materialism? You know, all joking aside about the kind of, you know, this is not a kind of small church versus megachurch kind of dynamic here.

[14:25] I mean, not all small churches are faithful and not all big churches are faithless, right? The real issue here is how hard it is to remain faithful when you're surrounded by material wealth.

That's the issue in Laodicea. It's phenomenally difficult to cling to Christ when you have so much else in your life to cling to.

The thing that I want to make clear is the Bible does not condemn wealth per se. And in fact, there are people in the early church, people like Lydia, who are very wealthy and they're very much a part of the life of the church there.

And so wealth is not condemned, but wealth is seen as a great temptation and a threat to Christian faithfulness. And I think that this is especially true for Christians in the West and especially true for Christians like us living in a place like this.

It's no coincidence that the Laodicean church was wealthy and lukewarm. No coincidence. And it's no coincidence that as we look at our society, that many of the wealthy elites also tend to be very theologically liberal and relativistic.

[15:41] Right? They go together. It's no coincidence that wealthy elites tend to be the most relativistic. And by the way, when I say wealthy elites, that would include most people in this room.

Okay? So don't think I'm talking about somebody else. Okay? So to say everything is relative, right? In other words, to say, well, you know, God could be Yahweh or God could be Allah or God could be an impersonal, transcendent life force.

And I'm really open to God being whatever people think God is. You know, that has the air of enlightenment in our culture. That has the air of learning. It has the air of sophistication.

But the fact is, I want to suggest that that way of thinking is the very essence of privilege. It's the very essence of existential privilege. Because the only way that you can truly be a relativist is if none of it really matters to you at all.

Right? It doesn't really actually make a difference because you don't actually need anything from God. You say, I'm wealthy. I've prospered. I need nothing. I need nothing from God.

[16:45] Right? The only way that you can actually think that way is because your wealth and your status and your technology and your education and your, they've convinced you of the limitless power of human beings.

They've convinced you of the unlimited potential of human beings. And so, if you're in that category, you can afford to treat religion like a luxury addition to your life.

It's like the metaphysical equivalent of a beach house in Malibu. You know, it's like you can have it or not. It's nice to have it. It has its place in your life and for some people that's a really great place to go when you need to relax.

But that's all it is. Right? If, on the other hand, you are powerless, if you're marginalized, if you're oppressed, if you're poor, if the only systems that exist around you, the government systems that are supposed to take care of you have abandoned you or they've exploited you or they've given preferential treatment to other people and you're left in the lurch and you have no hope, well, then you better believe these questions matter.

Is there a God? Who is that God? Is that God personal? Does that God know I'm here? Does that God care about me at all? Does that God have any power to intervene in my life at all?

[18:09] Can that God save my children? These are not topics for leisurely speculation in coffee shops. These are life and death questions because you're crying out because you have nothing else to cling to.

Right? So theological relativism is a kind of luxury religion and it's the lukewarm swill that Jesus vomits out onto the ground. And so, you know, in these final days of Lent, I think it's worth considering for us in this room how our wealth and privilege impact our relationship with God.

You know, last night, Laura and I went to see this old folk musician, David Wilcox. I don't even know if anybody knows who that is, but we went to see David Wilcox and one of the things he said that I thought was interesting, he said, I said, I write these songs and he says, they're way ahead of me.

And he says, I like to write songs and I learn from the songs. You know, their songs are further down the path than I am and I write them and then I learn from them for the rest of my life.

Sometimes preachers feel that way about our sermons, you know.

You preach something, you're like, man, I wish that was true about me. Man, I wish I fully believed that. You know, man, I wish I could really see how that would actually work in my life.

[19 : 22] And this is one of those places where I reflect on my own life. You know, I'm not a relativist, just to clear that up. Yeah, if the bishop asks, I'm not a relativist, okay.

Okay. Yeah, that's how rumors get started. I'm not a relativist. But when's the last time, I think, when's the last time I felt a desperate need for God?

I mean desperate, like on my knees. I have access to three hospitals within like five minutes of my house. I have access to a 24-hour pharmacy.

I can literally go on my computer and within two hours have groceries delivered to my house. anything that I want. I have Uber. I have parents.

I have an amazing house. I mean, the list just goes on. When's the last time I actually thought if God doesn't intervene right now, I am lost. How much does our wealth allow us to compartmentalize our faith, to relegate it to the backseat of our life?

[20 : 28] Be quiet unless I talk to you. Right? Don't bother me. I'm focusing on my life. Just be quiet and read a book unless I want to talk to you and then talk to me.

How much am I allowed to do that because of the wealth and privilege in my life? You know who Marie Kondo is? She's kind of her own luxury religion. You know, it's like she only matters if you have a lot of stuff.

But Marie Kondo says, what does she say? What's her mantra? If something doesn't bring you joy, toss it out, right? I think that we could modify that a little bit and say, you know, if something doesn't bring you joy in God, if something doesn't catalyze you to see God as the creator and provider and giver of all good gifts, then maybe we should consider giving it to somebody who needs it.

Because here's the thing about the material world. God doesn't hate the material world. Here's the thing. God created the material world, all of this, as a means of communing with him.

We're meant to enjoy, experience, participate in, and celebrate God through this world. It's meant to be a means of communion, not a means of insulation. And so if anything is insulating us from God's presence and the joy of who he is, we should probably get rid of it.

[21 : 58] So this is the first thing we need to reflect on. What does faithfulness look like in a culture of materialism? The second thing, and the last thing I'll say is this. Mercy in the midst of a meritocracy.

Mercy in the midst of a meritocracy. I don't have to tell you we live in a culture that is a meritocracy. You are as good as your resume. You are as good as your most recent accomplishments.

You are as good as your accolades. And that's about it. And because we live in this culture and we by default define ourselves and one another by our accomplishments, it's so easy to import that way of thinking into the church.

It's so easy to import that way of thinking into how we think God thinks about us. And yet this is showing us that Jesus is the only one worthy enough, the only one righteous enough to sit on the throne of the world.

It's saying that Jesus is the only one whose resume passes muster. And yet Jesus is also the only one who decides who else is welcomed into the kingdom.

[23 : 08] And we say, well, that's so exclusive. How could Christianity be so exclusive to say, Jesus is the only way, the only truth, the only hope, the only means of salvation? Yeah, Christianity is radically exclusive.

Unapologetically exclusive. We're probably the most exclusive religion there is. Because we say there's only one person that meets the standard. But look at that person.

And if you understand the heart of that person, you realize that Christianity is simultaneously the most exclusive faith there is and the most inclusive faith there is.

Because look at the heart of Jesus. What do we pray every week? His eternal nature is to have mercy. This is the heart of our God. So his eternal nature is to give people precisely what they don't deserve, didn't earn, could never repay.

And so when he promises the Philadelphians that even though they've been rejected, that they will become pillars in the true temple. You know, this is actually an allusion to Isaiah 56, this amazing

place in Isaiah's prophecy.

[24 : 15] In Isaiah 56, it's focusing entirely on people who assumed they would be rejected by God. Foreigners, who at this point in Israel's history had no business coming to the temple.

And eunuchs, people who either forcibly or many times voluntarily, because they knew it would advance their career, had sexually altered their own bodies so that they could occupy higher positions of power and influence.

For some people, this was the only way they had a shot at a good career. And yet, because they had sexually altered their bodies, the law was clear in Deuteronomy, you're not allowed in the temple. You're not allowed in the temple.

And yet, Isaiah 56 says, the day is going to come and someone is going to come on that day who will not only welcome people like that into the temple, but it says, to the eunuchs, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

I will give you an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. The eunuchs' greatest source of grief in the ancient world is that they would never have children, they would never have a family, they had sacrificed that or it had been taken from them.

[25 : 29] And Isaiah is saying, one day someone's going to come, they're going to welcome you in and you're going to have descendants as numerous as the stars. You're going to be built into the architecture of God's house.

So through Jesus, people who never would have been allowed in the earthly temple are given places of honor in the true temple. They're monuments and pillars. And by the way, this connects to Palm Sunday.

It connects to Palm Sunday in that, what did Jesus do right after the triumphal entry? What's the next thing he did? He enters Jerusalem, he goes straight into the temple. And what does he do? He begins to turn over tables and kick all the money lenders and the vendors out onto the street.

And why is that? It's not just because there was corruption happening, although there was. It's not just because Jesus doesn't like a free market. We'll talk about that later. prayer. It's because Jesus recognized that they had completely crowded the Gentiles out of the court of the Gentiles.

And he says, it is written that my house shall be a house of prayer for all people. He's saying, don't you get it? These Gentiles who are now welcome only into the outer court, you should let them pray because one day they're going to be pillars.

[26 : 44] There's going to be monuments of them in the temple. And one day you may bow to them. They will be the true descendants of Abraham. And so he kicks them out on the street. And so what this shows us again and again and again, and the Bible is full of this theme.

Although we live in a meritocracy where we're only as good as our resumes, God's family is defined by mercy. We are a people of mercy because we are a people who are only a people because we've received mercy.

And that means we recognize that we have earned nothing. We are all impressive people. You're amazing people. But you've earned nothing.

We're entitled to nothing. Every single thing in our lives is an undeserved gift. And what that produces in the lives of Christians, above everything else, is humility and gratitude.

gratitude. Thank you that I'm even here. Thank you that I'm even alive. Thank you that I have people who love me and care about me. I don't deserve any of it.

[27 : 50] And I think one day when all is said and done, and when we look around, you know, when kind of all accounts are settled and the new Jerusalem has come down and everything's been renewed, and you're kind of looking around and like, you know, who made it?

You know? Who's here? You know, I think that's probably going to happen. Wow, man. Wow, do I recognize any? And you look around. I think that there are going to be some people who assumed all along they were in.

And we won't see them. But I think that there are many, many, many, many people, probably many more than we dare hope, who maybe we all assumed. No chance.

No chance. And they're going to be laughing and singing and celebrating at the very center of the party. They're going to have the places of honor at the feast. That's the great joy of mercy is that it is completely unpredictable.

You know, we have our rules and our formulas and our ordo salutis, but at the end of the day, we're dealing with a God of radical, wild, unpredictable grace. And we have no idea what that's going to

mean in the kingdom.

[28 : 54] But Jesus does because he's the gatekeeper and he holds the keys. So it doesn't matter how successful we are. It doesn't matter how intelligent you are. It doesn't matter how accomplished we are.

It doesn't matter how morally upright we are or how much of an impact we've had in the world. The only thing that matters is this. Are you willing to humble yourself and receive the gift of mercy that Jesus offers?

Let's pray. której? Let's pray. Let's pray.