

Revelation 2-3

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[0 : 00] Just a brief prayer. Father, your word declares, this is the one to whom you will look, he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at your word.

You also remind us that the words that we hear from this book are not empty or hollow words. They are ultimately our very life. And so we come to it desiring life, desiring to hear the word of the Lord. We pray Pastor Helm, who at this time is in a pulpit in Havana, Cuba, declaring the same word. And we think of all the pulpits across this world, this globe in large, vast structures, in small field houses, in the outdoors, heralding the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Would it go out this morning and save? We pray these things for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, we come to, we continue our sermon series in the book of Revelation, titled 2017, Getting a Vision of Christ. Getting a Vision of Christ. This morning will be the second of, second installment of six sermons. And as we find ourselves in chapters two and three, we find that this Christ has a word for his churches.

[1 : 39] It makes sense that the exalted Christ would have a word for the church. For the church is the primary means whereby Christ serves his world. The church is to bear witness to Christ before the world.

I was given the option of somehow synthesizing these seven letters or selecting one of the seven. I opted for the latter.

Not because they aren't all relevant, but because this particular letter to this particular church struck me heavily.

And that is the last and final church, the church in Laodicea, verses 14 and following. The seven letters to the churches have distinct messages, and they're all textually interwoven.

The themes within these letters will reemerge later in the book of Revelation. Though they differ in content, structurally, they're almost identical. As John Stott has noted, they all follow the same form.

[2 : 48] You may have caught it as Christopher read. It starts with an announcement from an angel of both recipient, messenger, and author. After the announcement, there's an assertion by Christ.

He knows something. I know. Following that assertion, there's a message contextualized to every church. Some, it was remarks of commendation.

Others, most of them, remarks of criticism. There's an appeal that's identical in all seven letters. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

And each one closes with a promise. A promise. A promise addressed to overcomers. A promise of eternal life. Language. All various sorts of language.

All describing differently eternal life. All phrases that are borrowed from the final three chapters in the book of Revelation. An announcement, assertion, message, appeal, promise.

[3 : 51] The structure is the same. The content is different. There's a sense that these letters, though not addressed to us, are applicable to you and I.

We are given access to this correspondence, ultimately, for our preservation and our witness to the world. Therefore, it's an immense benefit for us to read and study these letters.

So from the seven, how did I select the seventh letter to Laodicea? It may sound self-serving, but it's the one that most intensely confronted my personal condition.

This year, I turned 37. Crazy. I'm not sure when that mid-year crisis is supposed to hit, but if the Lord permits and tarries, I sense that I'm halfway.

I'm halfway. When the new year turned, questions plagued me. Are my best days behind me? Were my most passionate and desperate prayers those that I uttered in the past?

[5 : 00] Were my most fervent and zealous endeavors for the gospel only visible in my rear view mirror? Where are those days of seeing public school auditoriums filled with unbelievers

anticipating the gospel message?

Where are those days in public movie theaters where I was found in tears under the weight of gospel preaching?

Are those moments long gone when I found myself praying publicly with my teammates before games? Where had that label gone of being on fire for Jesus?

Borrowing the language from the letter to the church of Ephesus, have I abandoned the love I had at first? So this morning, I stand before you a mere man reflecting on life with Jesus really 20 years on.

Metaphorically speaking, once a raging fire, but now finding myself far more tame, contained, and fearful of diminishing.

[6 : 12] Two remarks I'd like to make really to myself and to you this morning. Two anchors to tie our time down in the text.

Christ is the living and the exalted one who has a message to the churches. This morning, may two things become absolutely clear for you and I. Christ knows your works according to 3 verse 15.

And for simplicity's sake, despite your works, Christ knocks on your door. Verse 20.

Christ knows and Christ knocks. Verse 15 is a claim of omniscience. I know your works. The source of the statement is the amen, the faithful and the true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

Chapter 1 verse 5. actually identifies this individual as Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from among the dead, the ruler of all the kings of the earth.

[7 : 21] The verses that follow 15 are not suggestions. They are not opinions. They are not conjecture. They are the words from Christ, a faithful and a true witness, speaking truthfully, honestly, and as a witness to testify of the church's condition.

Therefore, as a witness to the churches, if they choose to repent for the church in Laodicea, it will prove to be salvific, saving.

If the church denies and rejects his message, that very rejection will prove to be their judgment and condemnation. This will be clearer in the upcoming weeks, but know this, the faithful and the true witness we see this morning in the end of the book will be the judge.

First, Christ knows. Christ knows. Christ declares what he knows and what he knows makes him want to vomit. They are neither hot nor cold.

Instead, they are lukewarm. There has been a lot written on this. Some have reasoned it refers to spiritual vitality. They were neither hot nor cold.

[8 : 38] Yet the explanation is lacking because it would make sense that Christ desires hot, wholeheartedness, fervency, but it's bizarre that Christ would prefer cold over lukewarm.

Spiritual deadness. It appears to be a functional comparison the more and more I read it. They're supposed to be either hot or cold, not lukewarm.

Instead of being neither, they are therefore ineffective. They are, like Jesus puts it, they are salt that has lost its saltiness. And the only good they're good for is to be thrown out and trampled.

They are the bizarre case of a light being lit or a candle being ignited and then covered under a cup. In short, Jesus is saying, you've been ineffective as a church.

Therefore, you make me sick. So sick, I want to spit you out. There's been various proposals of how this may be properly understood.

[9 : 43] Some say the geographic location of Laodicea illuminates what this means. On the north of Laodicea, there was a city, Hierapolis, that was known for its hot springs that brought medicinal healing.

To the east, there was Colossae who was known, was probably founded because of its rich, cool water supply. So they were neither Hierapolis or Colossae.

They were kind of in between. They had no water source like Chicago situated on a lake so they would import their water from the south, from hot springs from the south. And by the time it got to the city, it was doubly tarnished.

First, it was lukewarm and gross. And secondly, the minerals found in the water made it undrinkable. Some have thought of it that way. Others have proposed it's a medicinal explanation.

They've reasoned that the act of vomiting is actually restorative. In the same way, if you and I fall ill, the purging and the vomiting up of bacteria may actually prove to be for our healing, enabling us to regain strength and vitality.

[10:54] Interestingly, growing up in both Chinese and American context, I've had to juggle two worlds. One example is in the area of restorative medicine.

I've played high school sports, football and basketball, and I encountered all sorts of dings and injuries and I don't know how many times my ankles have been sprained and things like that. But the response from the trainers and the coaches was always the same. Ice it. Elevate it. Ice it. Elevate it. Ice it.

Elevate it. Well, I reached out to Professor John Yoon here at the university medical school. I said, why do Western doctors always say ice it? Well, he writes, they would say injuries induce an inflammatory response, namely heat, and it can be counteracted by what is cold, so you ice it. It reduces the inflammation. Well, on those days, occasions, when I had injuries, I would go home and I would confront my Chinese parents and I would tell them, I need to ice it.

[12:04] I need to ice it a lot. Get a bucket and fill it with ice and water and I'm going to submerge my busted ankle in this bucket. And they refused. No.

You don't ice it. You heat it. Get a heat pad. Get hot water. As hot as you can tolerate. Soak your foot in there. Heat it. Hotter the better.

And their explanation was always in Mandarin. I'll say it to you and try to translate. They would say, which means, literally translated, it would help get rid of the poison.

And I'm like, well, what does that even mean? But more contextually put, it actually removes impurities. It disinfects.

Heat disinfects. The reasoning behind it is it actually stimulates blood to move and then the cells to do their work to bring repair. And I think this medicinal line of thinking may help us in how we think about this.

[13:12] There was actually a major medical center in Laodicea. That when they were supposed to be treating injuries and bringing healing and restoration, they were doing neither.

They were ineffective. According to recent studies, both ice and heat can treat acute injuries, such as sprained ankles. In the end, it's difficult to reconstruct what hot and cold may have meant historically, but we can be sure being lukewarm was what brought God's displeasure.

They were condemned for being ineffective. Having lost their effectiveness, they were no longer a witness to the world. They were a church which had become useless, which ought to be discarded. They lacked the power of witness. They lacked the potency and the flavor of transformation within their city. In the end, they're purposeless to Christ.

Christ. The root cause of their ineffectiveness is actually noted here. Verse 17 and 18, they are self-deceived.

[14:19] You see that. They say, I am rich. I have prospered. I need nothing. They had an inaccurate view of themselves as we continue.

They declared themselves to be rich, prosperous, and lacking no material thing. Now, this is attested to in history. History tells us that actually Odysseus came under a great earthquake in AD 60.

And because of the great wealth of the city, they did not have to seek out the capital Rome to get external funds to fund the rebuilding of their city.

They were rich. They were very rich. The irony is that their earthly account was abundant while their heavenly account sat empty. They had yet to make a deposit.

They were materially prosperous but spiritually bankrupt. The material wealth had led them down this road of self-reliance. It is this that condemns them, a self-sufficiency asserting that they needed nothing, they lack nothing.

[15:30] Their self-assessment, their self- self- assessment, their self- evaluation, this was what fueled Christ's judgment.

The Bible recounts for us a similar story. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the story all providing unique vantage points. The story goes, Jesus was journeying and a man, eager, actually runs up to Jesus, kneels before him and asks the most important question you and I need to ask.

What must I do to inherit eternal life? It turns out this man is law-abiding. He is actually wealthy. He's powerful. He's young.

His future is very bright and very promising. He is a man who is independent, who is earnest, who is able to provide so much so that the world would say there is nothing he needed.

He is actually the ideal candidate in the world's eyes for discipleship. He, in the worldly sense, is the man that every young woman in this room would want to bring home to mom and dad.

[16:42] Yet Jesus' diagnosis is piercing. To the world, he had everything, this rich young world. To Christ, he lacked one thing.

Jesus says to him, go sell everything you have and give it to the poor and come follow me. And the mark account, I believe, is so vivid. He turns away, deeply saddened, because he was a man of great possessions.

You see, he's the ideal candidate for discipleship in the line of thinking of the bystanders. Even if I were a disciple, I would be asking the question, Jesus, we want that guy on our team, don't we? Because you know those occasions when we run out of food? He has money to buy the food, and you know how we don't really have a place to stay? I mean, we'd be staying in the Ritz if this guy was on our team.

He's the ideal candidate in the world's eyes for discipleship. Yet, to the disciples' astonishment and amazement, he flips their thinking on its head.

[17:53] How hard is it for the wealthy to enter the kingdom? Elaborating further, he says it's actually impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom. And this was Laodicea, magnified from one individual to an entire congregation.

We are rich, we are prosperous, we need nothing. And this is what the world thinks as they look at the blessed. In those days, it was a popular line of thinking that if I were materially blessed, that meant that I was favored by God.

Assuming they would have Jesus' commendation for their wealth, their status, and their self-sufficiency, they perceive themselves ideal for Jesus' acceptance. Jesus, you love us because you've blessed us.

When in reality, Jesus' indictment, instead of giving them a commendation, he gives them condemnation.

You believe you're blessed, you perceive you're rich, you boast of your prosperity and abundance as if you need nothing, yet the exalted Christ says to them, you are wretched, pitiable, better translated pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

[19:10] See, unlike the pressure the other churches faced, the Laodiceans faced a graver evil in danger. Sardis faced the onslaught from unbelievers in their city.

Philadelphia and Smyrna came under Jewish persecution. Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira were avoiding false teachers and heretical ideas.

They had all these external forces coming against them. but Laodicea, their greatest danger came from within themselves, their own heart.

They had succumbed to the evil of their own heart. It wasn't false teaching. It wasn't persecution. It wasn't unbelievers inducing suffering upon them.

it was their very own heart. They were entirely unaware of their condition. It was so bad that their condition excommunicated their very savior from their company.

[20:21] The irony is that they are the exact opposite of what they perceive themselves to be. Jesus instructs them in verse 18 to reinvest their resources.

They are to reconsider how they spend their money instead of making effort to secure fine clothing, pursuing worldly acquisitions. The invitation is now to come and buy from Jesus. He's saying stop strolling up North Michigan Avenue trying to acquire these luxury goods.

Buy at the market of your maker, the store of your savior. He gives the church investment advice. If you want to change your condition and you want to secure true wealth, come and buy from me.

He's saying if you accept my reproof, and my discipline, be zealous and repent. Repent of your ineffectiveness and repent of your self-sufficiency. Christ knows the condition of his church, the hearts of his people, and continually is reproofing his church of their self-reliance, self-confidence, and spiritual smugness.

The condition at the church of Laodicea had granted them this sense of independence, independence from Christ. They believed they no longer needed him. They no longer wanted what he offered.

[21:38] It was not adequate. It was so severe that the writer uses the bold picture of Christ standing outside the church doors, knocking to enter.

Secondly, and far more quickly, Christ knocks. And here you have the marvelous picture of the grace of Christ. Him who has been cast out is standing at the door pleading with you to come back in.

To the church, Christ says, I'm quoting commentator, to the church, Christ says, behold, I stand at the door and knock. In their blind self-sufficiency, they had, as it were, excommunicated the risen Christ from their congregation.

In an act of unbelievable divine condescension, Jesus requests permission to enter and reestablish fellowship.

It's the rejected one who brings restoration. The forsaken one becomes the forgiving one. The one the church had replaced was now the one outside the door desiring to reenter.

[22 : 45] And the promise is for anyone who hears and opens the door. It's a picture of intimacy, fellowship, reconciliation. Two parties who were once at odds are now restored to wholeness.

What is shocking about this picture is the one who has everything to offer is approaching the one who is poor, blind, naked, wretched, pitiable. They that were described as vomit at the beginning of the letter, emblematic of rejection, are now found dining at a table, emblematic of acceptance.

The movement of the passage is glorious. It's actually a picture picture of the gospel. Those who deserve rejection and to be cast out find themselves seated at a meal next to Jesus.

He knows our condition, yet there he stands, persistently knocking. It's a divine act of raising the poor from the dust, you and I, the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

It is the exchanging of one's soiled and stained garments for the garments of salvation, a robe of righteousness. If we open the door, he simply doesn't just come in for a meal before warned.

[24 : 07] He comes in to do actually a makeover. He doesn't just want to recline at your table to eat. He wants to remake all the corners of your house. He is not looking just for permission to enter.

He seeks to take possession of the entire property. He is looking to exercise his rule in every individual heart, in every congregation, ultimately establishing his rule upon the earth.

And as I began this morning, I am not that far in, 20 years in, I am behind some, ahead of others.

The indictment of the Laodiceans was a word for me.

And I will speak a little candidly, because my boss isn't here. Sorry, Dave. But when I look back on my faith journey, the question that haunts me is, why have I not grown in dependency on Christ?

It's contrary to how we raise kids, it's contrary to how we mature as an adult, it's actually looked upon in shame if you are dependent on someone in your vibrant years.

[25 : 28] My duty as a father is to raise my children to be independent when they move out, get married. You've come to the University of Chicago and you've learned a few things, maybe how to do laundry, how to cook, and things like that.

You're to grow independent. yet in being a Christian, this is one area where it actually diminishes our effectiveness as a witness.

The more independent I grow of Christ, the less effective I become. I find as I mature and grow in faith, I operate with this level of independence.

I have nearly ten years of theological education. I'm not materially prosperous, but I get it. I could say it. I could think it.

I could recite it. I could do all the things I need to do. But in my heart, I've come to think.

[26 : 37] Do I really need Christ? I'm supposed to be more dependent. I'm supposed to be more aware of my brokenness and the world's brokenness.

I'm actually supposed to increase in faith and fervor. But I find myself at times going the other way. And so, words to myself and to you, four things that emerge from this passage to combat that independence.

First, embrace weakness. The words of one of my dear friends and mentors, Pastor Alistair Beck, resounds in my head. He said, if weakness, if dependency is your objective, which it is, then weakness is an advantage.

If dependency is your objective, then weakness is an advantage. Your failures and your shortcomings, your deficiencies, your weaknesses, when properly understood in the light of God's purposes, serve actually to make you more dependent upon Him.

So when you fail, whether it be academically, relationally, spiritually, all those things are embedded in your narrative so that you grow more dependent upon Him.

[28 : 05] Embrace weakness. Two, be wary of your goodness, accomplishments, and accolades. I'm not saying ignore them, for all accomplishments should be celebrated, but do not bathe and relish in them.

They will prove only to enlarge your head, increase your pride, sow seeds of independence. For some people, actually a lot of the people I talk to, their goodness and their prosperity is their greatest impediment to faith.

love. It's not that they're so bad and terrible, wretched, broken. It's that they are so good, so wealthy, so prosperous.

Embrace weakness. Be wary of goodness. Always repent. Repentance is a continual posture. It's not something we did only in the moment of our conversion.

Repentance is actually habitual. It's a practice that you and I need to embrace. It's the consistent acknowledgement of my imperfections and my idolatrous heart before God.

[29 : 15] When I repent, I point out that I'm a sinner and that I need a Savior. Repent. Lastly, never let the truth of the gospel be too far from your lips.

On your best days, the gospel will remind you that you don't deserve it. You're just a mere servant doing what you ought to be doing. On your worst days, it will remind you that, yeah, you and I are utterly broken, but the Lord is able to save and to rescue.

This letter to the church of Laodicea is a picture of the gospel. It's staggering to think that it's directed to a church, a body of believers. It's been applied mainly to unbelievers historically, I think. But regardless of the audience, the letter rings true because my personal account is I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

I determine my destiny. I have no need. I have no lack. I will make myself rich. I will prosper until the grace of God and his loving reproof comes and says, you are actually impoverished.

[30 : 31] Buy from me. Come and buy from me. Even if you don't have money, buy and eat. Come, buy wine, milk, without money, without price. And so I approached in faith and received what Christ offered.

I dressed in robes of white, standing redeemed, forgiven, with my shame hidden and my guilt removed, granted that I might see the beauty that was bound up in Christ.

That he sat not only enthroned in heaven, but he sits enthroned on earth in the lives of his people where he exercises his rule and his reign.

And may that be true of you this morning. May that be evident when we assemble. May the gospel of Jesus Christ be where your confidence sufficiency and dependency rests.

May we be those who endure and persist to inherit all the divine promises bound up in Christ. Let's pray. Oh, Father, for hopefully most of us, we could say as we ran our hell-bound race, indifferent to the cost, you looked upon our helpless state and you led us to the cross.

[32 : 08] And we beheld God's love displayed that Christ suffered in our place. You bore the wrath reserved for us. grace. And now all we know is grace.

And so, Father, as we sing and we reflect and as we respond, may our greatest joy in life be the growing dependency that we have in Christ.

As we get older, as our outwardly, outward bodies waste away, may it be sight of us, wow, how much they have clung to Jesus all the more.

Help us to this end, God. Make us less self-reliant, less self-sufficient, less able, less proud, less foolish.

foolish. May we depend solely and exclusively on Christ. Amen.