

Jesus Christ Among His Churches III - Morning Service

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[0 : 00] We are not the first culture to love external appearances, but we've become kind of expert in this. We've become obsessed and addicted to physical appearances, and it puts a crippling pressure on teenagers.

This is the number one problem, teachers say now amongst teens. And through a unique combination of factors, many people agree that we are a superficial and shallow people, and that we live amongst a group, we live in a city which is shallow and superficial.

And we skim along the surface, and we are easily deceived by appearances. That's why every week we turn to the Word of God. God, it's God alone who sees through reality to what's really there.

And God has spoken and explains what's going on, revealing who he is and revealing who we are. So that's why the last book of the Bible is called Revelation for a Reason.

In this book, God peels back the veil and shows us what's underneath, what's really happening. And he does that not just to, not so that we'll know how clever he is, but so that we will gradually be healed of our own self-deception if we listen to him.

[1 : 30] And there's a great deal going on in these passages, more than we realize. And I don't know about you, but one of the most challenging things about looking at the book of Revelation is just how many details there are.

And whoever chose the preaching series at St. John's decided we would do two churches this week. And we're going to have to leave a lot of the treasure on the ground.

So Jesus is addressing seven messages to seven churches, seven letters, if you will. And the number seven is the number of completeness. What the risen Christ says to these seven churches, he says to all churches.

Throughout history, the Christian church has said, although every church has unique issues, this is the word of God for us today. And each church begins by saying, these are the words of the risen Jesus, and finishes by saying, let him who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying, now, ongoingly present to the churches.

And between these two points, at the beginning and the end of each letter, there's a pattern where Jesus begins and he says, I know what's going on for you. I know your environment. I see through what's going on.

[2 : 47] And then he commends churches, all of them except one. And then he tells churches what he's going to challenge them on, all except one. And then he commands responses, and then he makes astonishing promises.

I love this. Because every one of these churches is a mixed bag. Every church has issues. And if this is your first time at St. John's, we have issues.

I love St. John's, but we have major issues. And it's tempting to say a lot of things here, but all I want to say is that these issues are reflected in these letters to the seven churches.

So we're going to look at two churches, the church to Pergamum and the church to Thyatira, chapter 2, 12 to 27. And they're very similar in their troubles. The only difference is that what is started at Pergamum gets worse in Thyatira.

So I'm going to do two things, just two points. I want to look at the troubles, and then I want to look at what Christ offers. So I've called the first point, the churches in crisis.

[4 : 0 0] Let's have a look how Jesus starts with Pergamum. In verse 13, he says, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.

Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful servant, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

Now, I don't know if the Chamber of Commerce took Jesus' words and put it on the outside of Pergamum. Pergamum, where Satan dwells. Welcome to the throne of Satan.

Pergamum was the most important city of the seven in terms of governance, beautiful capital of the province. It was a headquarters for art and architecture and sport and temples and cuisine.

It was a big tourist destination. And Jesus looks straight through that, and he says, it's where Satan's throne is. Now, I think the Bible is clear, and we need to be clear about this.

[5 : 0 5] There is a personal, evil, spiritual being called Satan. Let me read from John Stott. He says, We need to rid our minds of the medieval caricature of Satan.

Dispensing with the horns, the hooves, and the tail, we are left with the biblical portrait of a spiritual being, highly intelligent, immensely powerful, and utterly unscrupulous.

Jesus himself not only believed in his existence, but warned us of his power. And Satan hates Christian churches.

The real focus of his hate is Jesus Christ, but Jesus Christ is beyond his grasp. And so he turns his rage on Christian churches. And what he seeks to do is he wants, above everything else, to sever our connection with Jesus.

He wants to stop churches from shining the light of Jesus Christ in their context. And Satan has three main strategies, and you can see them here in these two letters.

[6 : 1 1] The first is force, threats, persecution. As Satan knows how much we love our comforts, he wants to draw us away from the love of Christ, and his first strategy is the most crude.

It's bringing external pressure to bear on Christians who believe. And it begins subtly. I mean, we all feel this, a sense of embarrassment about our faith, or the temptation to be ashamed of Jesus.

You might have been told to tone it down a little bit. And if you don't tone it down, those words can sometimes become threats, and in some contexts, it escalates into physical violence.

This has happened again and again and again throughout the 2,000 years of church history. Do you remember the early church in Jerusalem so full of joy and generosity? And in the early months, they enjoyed the favor of the whole city.

But then as the city began to realize the exclusive claims that they were preaching about Jesus Christ, it quickly turned to threats and violence. Well, anywhere you were in Pergamum, you could look up and there was a 1,000-foot mountain at the end of the city, and you can see it's still there.

[7 : 2 5] You can see the temples on the top of it. And it was crowned with temples. And the most important temple for Pergamum there was a temple to the emperor. They were the first city outside Rome that had been given permission to build a temple to worship Caesar, a hundred years before this is written.

And what happened was, is once a year, every person in Pergamum had to go to the temple and had to offer a bit of incense to Caesar and had to declare Caesar Curious, Caesar is Lord.

And if you didn't, you could be arrested and put to death. It's very interesting. In the verse I just read, Antipas, a member of their congregation, had already been put to death.

He was called on to curse Christ. Instead, he chose execution. Now, we have not lost any members to martyrdom at St. John's.

But I imagine it had a profound impact on the rest of the church as they cared for his family and the children. I was 16 years old, living in Australia with my parents, when Bishop Festo Kavenjare from Uganda came and stayed with us.

[8 : 45] An Anglican bishop from Uganda, escaping persecution at the hands of Idi Amin, who was a monster. And Amin had rounded up Festo and two other bishops and he'd let them go except for the senior bishop, Janani Lawum, whom he tortured to death personally that night, announcing the next day that Lawum had died in a car accident.

And Kavenjare escaped and he went back four years later and wrote a book called Forgiving Idi Amin. In the weeks before Lawum was killed, Amin had demanded everyone in Kabbali, which was the centre of Festo's diocese, that everyone in Kabbali gather at the soccer stadium to watch the execution of three lay Christian leaders.

And several people who were there have written accounts of this. And the crowd was silent as the three Christians were let out. And as they were let out, they waved to the crowd and they smiled.

And they said hello to people. And their joy was so startling that the soldiers, the execution squad, forgot to put their hoods on.

And so as they were shot, they were singing and praying and waving to the crowd. They died smiling. And this is a big problem for Satan, you see, because the persecution of Christians often backfires.

[10 : 14] It doesn't always, but it often does. And when Christians die gladly, it massively strengthens other Christians. And love for Christ spreads because they see in people the reality of the kind of thing we were just singing, that Jesus Christ who died is alive and he holds the keys of death and hell.

So when that strategy doesn't work, when the strategy of coercion doesn't work, Satan always goes to two other strategies. Let me mention them for you. The first is lies and false teaching.

So look back at verse 14, please. Chapter 2, verse 14. Jesus says to the Pergamites, I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balaam to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

So when external pressure doesn't work, the next strategy Satan uses is to spread poison within the church through lies. Balaam is a notorious Old Testament character who taught God's people that all they needed to do to stop suffering was to join the surrounding pagan peoples in their religious festivals.

Balaam was an early multi-faith pioneer and he taught basically it doesn't matter what you believe, you just need to be a bit more open, join in the way the others are doing it, you can keep your faith private.

[11 : 54] We don't actually have him saying that, I'm extrapolating. It was very appealing because Israel's pagan neighbours worshipped in a particular way. They went and they had a bang up feast to Baal and they offered food to Baal and then they ate the food and then everyone, they had an orgy as they was all part of the worship, part of the liturgy.

And you can see the appeal of this in Pergamum because not only on that tall hill was a temple to the emperor, there was an altar to Zeus and a temple to Athena.

You can see today the ruins of the massive temple to Dionysius, Bacchus, wild parties, wine, theatre. Right in the middle of Bacchus' temple is a 10,000 seat theatre.

And what do you do as a Christian in that city, trying to live out your faith in a meaningful way, loving your neighbours, engaging the city? Well, in the church, there's some who are beginning to hold this teaching and Jesus says, the teaching is nothing but a stumbling block.

And stumbling block is the word for a trap. It's the most primitive animal trap. It's a box with a stick at one end holding it up and some bait in it. And the idea is the animal comes in and eats the bait, knocks the stick down, dinner.

[13 : 10] Because what you believe matters. What you believe about God matters most of all. And the word Jesus uses is very clever because if you believe lies about God, you're already inside the trap feeding on the bait.

What happens next? That brings us to the third strategy. And that is moral drift. Because false ideas about God always lead to moral, lead to moral corruption and emptiness.

And for this, we're going to move down the road from Pergamum to Thyatira, the next church where the problem was worse. Because false teaching was not just some people on the edge were holding onto it, but was officially tolerated and that was leading to false living.

The church in Thyatira, if you look down at verse 19 and 20, had its own prophetess on staff there, a woman prophet.

And she was seducing the servants of Jesus to practice sexual immorality and eat food offered to idols. The same moral temptations up the road to Pergamum. Jesus calls her Jezebel after a very colorful, wicked woman from the Old Testament.

[14 : 29] I'm not completely clear on how, on what she's teaching, but if you look at a combination of verse 24 with verse 20, it seems that what she was saying is that the only way for Christians to flourish in Thyatira was for them to experience the deep things of Satan themselves.

And the only way to do that, of course, was to engage in those things sexually and to go to worship idols. And the idea is it wouldn't affect you spiritually. Because Thyatira was a bit different than Pergamum.

Thyatira was the center of the trade guilds. There's all sorts of trade guilds there, including the, you know, the guild of making purple cloth. And you couldn't work, you couldn't get money unless you worked for a guild.

And you couldn't belong to a guild unless you went through the religious rituals to worship the god of that guild. Every guild had a god. Every god demanded its own rituals.

And the evidence we have of the after ritual sexual sleaziness would make you blush. And again, if you're a Christian, what are you going to do?

[15 : 39] You worship Jesus on Sunday, then leave Jesus at home on Monday, you've got a family to feed. And I think this is where Jezebel's teaching was so seductive. She would say something like, and I'm just, I'm extrapolating again, we're all very sophisticated people.

Everyone's doing it. There's no real harm in it. What you do with your body doesn't affect your beliefs. You know, how can you really love your neighbours unless you gauge with what they're going through?

And you might be thinking, what's the big deal? I mean, what is so terrible about eating food offered to idols and sexual immorality? I mean, who is this Jesus who says what we should do and not do?

It seems pretty normal in that culture. It seems pretty normal in our culture. But I think that would be to skate along the surface. I mean, take food offered to idols.

Joining in an idol feast is not a spiritually neutral thing to do. When you go to the feast, the idol god is the host. And if you offer food to that idol, the idea is that you enter into some sort of relationship with that god by eating the food, you're worshipping that god.

[16 : 50] You know, if you get a television camera from the outside, it just looks like that person is eating food. But something spiritual is taking place. Because we can open ourselves spiritually and the way we do that is through worship.

We spiritually bond with whatever it is that we worship. Whatever it is you worship, you give yourself to that thing, but we're made for Christ alone.

The same with sexual activities. The Jezebel style teaching said you can do what you want with your body. The real you is separate from that. Sexual activity doesn't affect the real you.

Daryl Johnson in his commentary on this rightly points out this is a tragic misunderstanding of the body. The Bible understanding of the body is it's not the outside part of me.

It is me. I am a body. It's not I have a body. I don't have a soul. I am a soul. If you look at Dan, Dan is a Canadian. He doesn't have a Canadian part.

[17 : 50] He is a Christian. He is a body. He's a Canadian looked at from a national point of view. He's a Christian from a believing point of view. He's a body from a creational point of view. The body is the real self, which is why in the resurrection Jesus Christ raises our bodies to life.

What you do with your body is the real you. So you feel the crises these churches are facing. I mean, these are Christians struggling to live out their faith. Well then, what does Jesus have to offer?

I move to the second point. I mean, what right does Jesus have to say these things to call on people to be faithful until they die, to be so different from the culture roundabout?

And so I move from churches in crisis to the churches in Christ. As you remember, the churches are all where Jesus is walking amongst the lampstands.

That's what makes a church a Christian church. What makes this place a Christian church is the presence of Jesus Christ, the presence in his word, the presence in the believers who come and worship Jesus.

[18 : 55] And what Jesus offers is three things. What he's done, who he is and some promises. What has he done? Well, the reason he's so concerned about his churches is because of his love.

Jesus is not neutral toward you and you cannot be neutral toward him. Because of what he's done, we either love him and worship him above everything else or we have something else in first place.

And if you weren't with us, in the first week in verse 7 of the first chapter we read how Jesus loves us now, ongoingly, present tense, and he demonstrated that by dying for us.

And he died for us despite the fact we don't deserve it. And we don't love him despite the fact that he is the only one who deserves it. The surprising thing is that throughout the Bible, God reveals himself to us as a lover.

He's not a cold, distant deity, a tyrant who gives off a few words, do this, don't do that. He is a lover. He is the God of exclusive, passionate love. And in Jesus Christ, in his son, he has given himself fully and utterly to us and he desires that we return his love.

[20 : 16] He desires that mutual intimacy and affection. Remember the last church, the church, the church in Laodicea, Jesus says, I'm standing at the door and knocking.

If you open the door, I will enter into your life and I will eat with you, fellowship with you and you with me. It's a mutual relationship. So you see, the worship of idols is not just an unfortunate thing, just misguided, sincere.

It's not just harmful to the worshiper. The worship of idols is spiritual adultery. It's taking worship that belongs to our true lover and giving it to a false lover.

And every other thing, every other thing you worship doesn't love you. Every other thing we worship doesn't die for us, doesn't save us, doesn't hold the keys of death and hell.

What does Jesus offer? What he's done. And what he's done demonstrates at the cost of his life that he loves him, that he loves us, I'm sorry, and he wants us to love him too. Secondly, who he is.

[21 : 21] Who does he think he is in Pergamum? Well, look down at verse 12. He says, the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

That's a picture of his divine word. It slices through the surface down to the things that are really true. The word of Jesus Christ exposes the lies that we tell ourselves.

You know, the lies like, I have to be perfect, my children have to be perfect. And who is he in Thyatira? Verse 18. The words of the Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

The burning, fiery eyes see through, but they also purify as they look. And I have to say, we've focused on the troubles of these churches, but because Jesus' eyes see through, he also sees what's good and beautiful about these churches.

He looks at Pergamum and despite their persecution and despite the false teaching, he says in verse 13, you hold fast my name. You didn't deny my faith.

[22 : 33] Every tiny act of faithfulness to Jesus, unseen by others, is treasured, is remembered by him. I think that's beautiful. Or in verse 19, here is Thyatira where Jezebel is and he says, verse 19, I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance and that your latter works exceed the first.

I mean, this is a mixed church. They're trying hard in the midst of this very difficult circumstance to serve and reach out and Jesus says, it's growing. You know, your serving is growing.

It's because of who he is that he sees and values us. It's because he is our lover. But nothing we do for him is embarrassing or lame or vain.

It's a bad illustration but in the first year of our marriage, I bravely bought my wife a dress, new dress, took it home, hoping, hoping for full acceptance.

It was the wrong colour. It was the wrong shape. It was the wrong size. And she swapped it out. But she loved what I did.

[23 : 50] She loved the fact that I'd done that. I think it's a bit the same with Jesus. We've been moving this last week and I've come across some old treasures, you know, diagrams and paintings my sons have painted.

They're not very good but I love them. It's the same with Christ. Who he is, what he's done and finally what he promises. Because at the end of each letter, Jesus makes unique and wonderful promises and if you're feeling in need of looking at the promises of Jesus, take a blank piece of paper and go through chapters 2 and 3, just write out the promises of Jesus to the seven churches.

They're full of encouragement. We only have time to look at just the two that Jesus gives to Pergamum. Verse 17, he says, to those who conquer, and that's a way of describing Christians who suffer and follow Jesus, to those who conquer, I'm going to give some of the hidden manna.

This is the Old Testament food that God provided that satisfied, satisfied and didn't run out and it's a contrast to idle food that never really sustains.

Jesus is offering himself to us and it's hidden from the world, it's hidden from those who don't believe, it's only for those who believe his words and feed on him, he's the bread of heaven. And secondly, he promises to give them a white stone, he says, with a new name written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it.

[25 : 21] And the name, of course, is the true character of a person and this is a promise that is for the person who receives the promise.

It's a unique assurance and personal consciousness for each Christian person that you are uniquely loved and connected with Christ. In other words, if we press on, if we hear Christ's words and respond to them, we come to know our own true Christian character.

It's a lovely promise from Jesus. These are the words of the risen Christ, the first and the last, the Amen. Let all those who have ears hear what the Spirit is now saying to his church.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.