

# Jesus Christ Among His Churches III - Evening Service

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 02 October 2016

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Good evening, everyone. My name is Aaron. I look after the service, and we are studying the book of Revelation. And for those of you who are just joining us here, the book of Revelation is not a secret timeline for the end of the world that we have to decipher. It's been often categorized by that. No, it's not. As we go through it, you'll realize it's mostly a pastoral letter.

It's a pastoral letter written to struggling Christians in what's ancient Turkey now. And its major concern of the letter is actually discipleship. Its major concern is this, how do I follow Jesus faithfully in my community or my city when my city might not be particularly friendly to Christians? So it's very relevant for us today. And just to give you another bit more background here, the book of Revelation does have, it has a structure to it. It begins with an introductory chapter, which we've already looked at a few weeks ago. Then chapters two and three are these short little letters, these short little letters that Jesus writes to these seven churches in Turkey.

And John just sort of dictates these little short sermon kind of letter things. And then after that, the book goes just full apocalyptic. And it's this long series of visions, which are beautiful and horrifying and sublime and terrifying. And in amongst the world, these dragons and lots of singing. And it's fantastic. So right tonight where we are is we're in a couple of those short letters at the start of the book. So chapters two, 12 to 29 is what we're looking at. So the words of Jesus to Pergamum and Thyatira. Now, if you've been listening carefully, if you listen to that reading carefully, you would have noticed that there's a bit of a pattern in these letters. They begin with Jesus introducing himself using some aspect from the start of the book. And then there's a commendation. For example, last week, the letter to Smyrna, Jesus says, like, I know you guys have had it really tough. Like, it's just been so, you've had such a hard slog, but you're stuck with it. Good going. Good job, right?

Then after the commendation, there's a complaint. Like in today's passage to Pergamum, Jesus says, I have a few things against you, which is such a heavy thing to hear, isn't it? I get really upset with my wife. Every now and then she says to me something like, she'll go, no, this is quite a common one actually. She'll go, Aaron, just for future. And then in that fraction of a second between the word future and the complaint, I replay the whole day in my head thinking, okay, of the many stupid things I did today. Which one does Amy want to talk about with me? So it's not fun, but it's vital for our relationship, of course. And it's vital for the relationship that Christ has with this church. He says, I have a few things against you. So there's a commendation, then a complaint, and then there's a call to repent, a call to sort it out. And then there's a threat. If you don't sort it out, here's what's going to happen. Like verse 16 today, repent, or I'm going to come to you and I'm going to bring my sword. So Jesus doesn't mess around here. And lastly, at the end of each letter, there's a wonderful promise. If you sort it out, if you repent, if you keep following Jesus, such and such will happen. So that's the structure of each letter. And you'll vaguely hear that in the sermon tonight.

Okay, so let's have a quick look at just some of the, a couple of these locations, Pergamum and Thyatira first, just to get stuck into the letters. First, let's start with Pergamum. Okay, so Pergamum was, was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. It's a large multicultural place. Jesus calls it, catchy title, the throne of Satan, which doesn't make it sound very nice. He calls it that because there were three very, very influential temples in Pergamum.

[ 4 : 20 ] There was the temple to Augustus, which was the first temple built to a Roman emperor. You know about the imperial cult. We've talked about this, the, the, the Caesars, the rulers of Rome decided to call themselves gods. And this was the first place they put one of the Roman emperor temples.

So this place, Pergamum was actually the center of emperor worship. So there's the, the temple of Augustus. There's the temple to Zeus, who is, if you know your mythology, that's the god of gods, right? In Roman theology. And then there was the temple to the god of healing, a much sought after god of healing with a difficult name, Asclepius, right? Asclepius. And, and that god has the symbol, which you will know, it's the staff with the snakes climbing up it. People would go into the temple and they'd lie down and they put all these unpoisoned snakes in there. And if you felt a snake writhe over your body, you'd get healed apparently. So anyway, so this is a, this is the throne of Satan, Jesus calls it. So it was a very tough place to be a Christian because so much of the cultural narrative of this place was tied up with a veneration of gods or the Lord emperor. And to be a good citizen in a place like that, there are lots of religious events you had to go to and lots of civic events that you had to go to that all involve these cultic practices. Tough place to be a Christian if you want to be a good citizen, if you want to participate in culture. Now Thyatira, quickly, we don't know much about Thyatira except that it had a ton of guilds. Now, if you play fantasy role playing games, I won't ask for a show of hands, I don't want to embarrass you, you'll know what a guild is. I saw that young man back there. You'll know what a guild is, but for the rest of you, guilds were these like powerful organizations, like collectives of people around an industry.

Like, so there was a guild, like a baker's guild and a bronze worker's guild and a silversmith guild and a leather worker's guild. And the guild members, they just, they looked after each other. So they could like stop like, like a leather worker from another territory coming into their sort of town. They looked after each other. And to be a craftsman in the ancient world, in the ancient Near East anyway, you needed to be in a guild.

Problem was, so these, these guilds had, had a god. They tried their own pagan god. And, uh, these folks in the guilds would get together sort of socially, they'd make a sacrifice to their god, and then it would all get a bit sort of debauched.

And, uh, so how do you be like a Christian silversmith in Thyatira? In a guild, when you know that you're a guild, to participate in it, you have to do this cultic practices and it all gets a bit sketchy. So, very tough.

[ 7 : 06 ] So, Pergamum and Thyatira, those are those places. Tough places to be a Christian. Tough places. Uh, Vancouver's a tough place to be a Christian. What do you do?

What do you, what are the, what's a, what's a Christian to do in places like this? There are, there are, there are, there are lots of options. There are four main options, though.

In terms of a Christian response to this, there are four main options. Let me, let me go through them. The first one is quit your faith. That's an option, isn't it? Uh, you like Jesus, but you just weren't expecting it to be this difficult.

So, you kind of just quit. Option one. Option two. I'll spend a little bit of time on this one. You could lie to yourself. You could venerate the gods of Rome.

If you lived a couple thousand years ago, you could venerate the gods of Rome, but tell yourself it's just a formality. Bah! Worship the gods of your trade, but kind of cross your fingers behind your back and go, look, it's just, it's just kind of, you know, just part of doing business.

[ 8 : 16 ] I don't really mean it. It's just a thing you kind of, it's just a thing you do. And that's the lie that people in these churches that Jesus wrote to actually believed. You know, it was this belief that I can go to a pagan feast, I can worship these other gods, I can get involved in all this kind of quite sketchy stuff in these pagan festivals, and it doesn't really mean anything.

I mean, I'm eating this food that's been sacrificed to the idols the passage talks about, but it's just meat, and the gods, it's just a piece of wood. I don't really believe any of this stuff. The problem with this attitude, of course, is that the people who lie to themselves like this, or are lied to, they misunderstand the nature of reality.

And here's what I mean by this. Biblically, for example, for example, biblically, a meal is not a neutral act. Now, I think you know this.

You know, when you eat with something, when you eat with somebody, I think this is a spiritual thing. The table is very important in the Bible. I mean, communion was the symbol that God, that Christ left us to remember him by.

The table is a very spiritual thing. God made it that way. It creates a bond. So you eat meat sacrificed to an idol in a pagan festival, it's creating a bond with the God that's represented there.

[ 9 : 37 ] The reality is, is we are spiritual beings. This is a spiritual universe, and the Christians in Pergamum and Thyatira were messing with these unseen forces, because they convinced

themselves of a lie through false teaching that, it's okay, it doesn't really matter, it's just a thing I do, don't worry about it.

As well as these pagan feasts, the passage also mentions sex as a problem in the church, sexual immorality. Again, the members of the church, it looked like they were believing a lie.

They didn't understand the reality of the situation. They thought they could participate in all the sketchy stuff going on in these cultic practices, and it didn't really mean much. Paul talks about this kind of heresy in Corinthians.

It's the heresy of believing that your body is unimportant, so it doesn't matter what you do sexually, it's only the soul that matters. That's a heresy. It's a lie.

The Bible teaches that our body is not, you know, our body is not like a prison for our soul. Our body is our real self.

[10:50] And the whole self is involved in the sex act. God meant it that way. It's a wonderful thing. So that married people have sex, spiritually it unites them, it brings them together.

It's a deeply spiritual thing. So when unmarried people have sex, it still unites them, because it's still a deeply spiritual thing, and that's why it's a damaging thing. So there's no such thing as casual sex. So these guild members in Thyatira going to these pagan festivals and sleeping with one of the temple prostitutes, it's not like this guild member can sort of park his soul outside the bedroom door and go in for some fun.

No, it's the whole body is involved, the whole self is involved. That's the reality of the situation that these churches didn't get. They were messing with these cultic practices.

They were messing with sex, and they're telling themselves it doesn't matter, and it does matter. It is a big deal. Folks, Jesus is passionate.

[12:00] You can see when you heard this letter read, these letters read, Jesus is very passionate about people thinking rightly about stuff, which is why he comes down so heavily here. It's why he hates false teaching in the church, and it was coming in these churches.

Okay, so that was a fairly significant excuse here. Where are we in the sermon? Okay, so we're talking about Christians suffering under persecution. What are the options for the Christian? They can quit their faith.

It's too hard. Jesus is cool, but it's just too hard. They can do that. They can lie to themselves and say, all this other stuff I'm doing, it doesn't really matter. Third option is they can just sort of adjust their beliefs.

They could say to themselves, let's say, again, you're a silversmith, an ancient thyatira. You could say to yourself, wow, Christianity, so old. It's like 50 years old.

It's like 50 years old. The world has changed. The world's moved on. We need to incorporate some of the good stuff in these cultic practices. We need to incorporate some of the good stuff about Roman culture and religion, and we shouldn't be so intolerant.

[13:11] They can adjust. Well, lastly, so you can quit, you can lie, you can adjust, or you can die.

And that's the only option that John gives us. He says that's the only Christian response, is death. As we read through Revelation, one of the things you'll notice is that all the solid, faithful followers of Jesus, they all get martyred.

Our sermon series is called Revelation on Earth as it is in Heaven. I suggested Revelation, everybody dies. But it didn't test well with the focus groups.

So, so, so, so, yeah. Now, based on those options, quit, adjust, lie, or die, how did, how did these churches go in Pergamum and the Thar, Tyra?

Well, they went, they went good and bad. In Pergamum, we read in verse 13 there that Jesus says, they, they say, you guys held onto my name under immense persecution, to the point of death.

[14:24] In fact, there's this guy, Antipas, who died because he was a witness to Christ. And the Thar, Tyra, he says, you guys do great works, verse 19, great service. So these are the commendations of Christ.

Here's the stuff, guys, you guys are doing really well at. But I have this against you. I think it's very interesting in Thar, Tyra, that works and service is what Jesus highlights in that church.

It's interesting to me because sometimes the church's greatest strength can cause it problems. Do you remember last week the church in Ephesus?

Corey mentioned it, that Jeremy preached on. Ephesus was so keen on keeping themselves from being sort of contaminated, right? So keen on doctrinal purity, so keen on staying sort of like in their

kind of thing and having it all together and stuff, that they had no interest in reaching out. They had no interest in the society and the culture around them. They had no interest in outreach. That was a problem. It was a problem connected to their strong point because they just wanted to stay pure.

[ 15 : 34 ] You know, they wanted to stay sort of... Pergamum, what's their strong point in the passage? Faithful witnesses. They're out there.

It's wonderful. They're out there. People are dying they're out there so much. What's Thyatira's strong point? Acts of service and works. They're out there. Brilliant. And what was the problem that they have?

As they were so out there, they'd become compromised in faith and action. We'll have a look at this. Let's have a look at now at the complaints Jesus levels against these churches.

And to talk about that, it's very interesting. Jesus invokes these Old Testament characters and sort of plants them in the story. He says, folks, here's your problem churches. To Pergamum, he says, it's just like Balaam and Balak all over again.

To Thyatira, he says, it's just Jezebel. It's Jezebel all over again. Now, I don't think there was a Balaam or a Balak in Pergamum. I don't think there was a Jezebel in Thyatira. But he uses these people because in the Old Testament, they were like these archetypal, they were like prototypes of specific problems that Jesus was naming.

[ 16 : 47 ] So first, Balaam and Balak. Who are these guys in Pergamum that Jesus names? Well, they are these Old Testament guys. Numbers 22, it talks about Balak was this king who hated God's people and so he hired a prophet to curse the Israelites, a guy called Balaam.

Balaam agreed to do it because he was going to get paid a lot of money. There's going to be a huge reward. But when Balaam opened his mouth, this miracle thing happened. Instead of cursing Israel, he blessed them.

So he kept trying to do it but just kept blessing them. So that's a problem. So the plan failed. But what Balaam did next is he got very sneaky because he still wanted the reward was he corrupted the Israelites from within.

And what he did is he got these pagan Moabite women who were very, very, very friendly women to become very, like to sort of basically grab a hold of the Israelite men and go, hey, come to this thing.

We got happening. You love it. And they did. And it turned out to be worshipping false gods. But the guys were pretty into it. And it nearly ruined Israel.

[ 17 : 55 ] He got them from the inside. The Moabite women seduced the men of Israel into idol worship. Jezebel, who's this that Thyatira is kind of connected to? Jezebel, that's 1 King 16.

So Jezebel somehow got married to King Ahab. She was a committed Baal worshipper. Baal's the fertility god. So she had a lot of influence over Israel in marrying this king.

And she sort of got the king to build a temple to Baal, which is obviously, you know, a complete shocker for God's people to do that. She executed anyone that spoke against her.

Her argument was this. Her argument was this. It was, you can worship Baal and you can worship Yahweh. You can worship Baal and you can worship Yahweh. It was a both-and position. You can just do them both.

It's great. Don't worry about it. So why does Jesus invoke these Old Testament figures? Because he's saying, it's great that you guys are out there, that you're witnesses and you're doing great works and acts of service, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, but you've been compromised and you've been compromised from within by false teaching.

[ 19 : 01 ] Somebody in these churches was teaching heresies and the heresies were a both-and heresy. They were saying, hey, you can do this. You can, Jesus, great, but you can actually do this other stuff as well.

It doesn't matter. It's okay. You can follow Jesus and this fun stuff over here, this cool stuff over here. Don't worry about it. It's great. Now, what is this stuff over here that I'm talking about? The passage mentions it and we've already talked about it, really, but it's important. I want to say it again, but in a slightly different way. In both passages, it says the stuff over here that they're involved with, because I think it's probably okay, was eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality.

Okay, Thyatira. Remember I said tons of trade guilds. They would have banquets. They were social occasions, veneration of these trade gods, and then all, a whole lot of sketchiness would happen. So someone in this church was saying it's fine. You just have to do it. If you want to be in the guild, it doesn't really matter. It's just business, which of course is a lie that was ruining these churches. Now, we don't have to deal with Greek gods now, so much, do we?

[ 20 : 10 ] But, we have other idols. We can believe the myth that what we do on the side won't affect us.

That we can have Jesus, and we love Jesus, but there's other stuff happening in our life, and it doesn't really matter. This stuff is okay. We know it.

Business is business. It's just how we do things. Or, it's just entertainment. It's just a show I like. Movie. Film noir.

It's just art. Does it really affect me? We love each other, and we want to show that in these ways. Everybody's kind of doing this kind of stuff. Oh, I go to church. I love Jesus. I love Jesus. This is great too. These things aren't. It's fine.

[ 21 : 11 ] Don't worry about it. It's a great temptation, isn't it, to separate these things out. It's a dangerous path, folks. In the passage, listen to what Jesus says to those who don't repent of this kind of attitude.

Verse 16, I will make war with you. He doesn't mess around, eh? I will make war with you. Verse 22, to Thyatira, he's talking about Jezebel here, this prototype heretic from within, poisoning the church.

He says, I'll throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her, adultery was, the Bible uses the metaphor of adultery to talk about idolatry.

It says, I'll throw her into great tribulation. Unless they repent of her works, I will strike her children dead. Now remember, these are symbols. Jesus isn't in the business of killing children here, of course.

And it's difficult to get behind exactly what these symbols mean, or practically work out what they actually mean in real life. But it's very, very, very clear that Jesus hates compromise.

[ 22 : 21 ] And he hates it when people are trapped into ways of thinking and living. Now for those who do repent, what do the passages say?

There are rewards. Hidden manor, white stones, the morning star, and I read a lot about this stuff, and there are probably 10 really great explanations for what the white stones mean.

One thing they all had in common, whatever they mean, it's about intimacy with Christ. The reward is Christ.

It's not super fun times in heaven. It's not your life going really well all the time. It's not going to happen. The reward is Christ.

Now before we finish up, I want you to notice something about how the passage talks about repentance. repentance. How does it talk about this idea of repentance? How does it talk about rejecting this stuff?

[ 23 : 30 ] Verse 17 and 26, and all the other letters it talks about it a little, it says this, the one who conquers, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. That's what the goal is. It's to be the one who conquers.

Very interesting word. That's the one that gets to be with Jesus eternally, the one who conquers. What does that mean though, to conquer? It's obviously really important. It's certainly not, the one who conquers is certainly not the person who has the winningest life.

We know that for sure. Antipas, you know, he got killed, right? And that's a pretty good clue to what this is about. At the end of the letter, these letters, here's this letter to Laodicea, chapter three.

And again, Jesus says this, the one who conquers, and he explains it. What does it mean to conquer? I will grant to him to sit with me on my throne as I also conquered.

So how did Jesus conquer? He conquered through dying. Conquering, overcoming, it looks like death. It looks like martyrdom. So I think the word is used somewhat ironically here because conquering can kind of look like losing, can't it, from the outside.

[ 24 : 43 ] So the trade guild member from Thyatira, the silversmith who conquers, is the one who refuses to participate in these pagan banquets. It hurts him socially, clearly hurts him financially.

He's dying. He's dying to what he wants. He's dying to what culture says is important. He's dying to what culture says is absolutely necessary to live a good life.

It's dying, and it's what a rigorous commitment to Jesus looks like, and it's what we're called to do. So, evening service, people of God, let's stand for the gospel.

Let us resist the temptation to compromise, or let us stop if we currently are. Jesus doesn't want us to live a compromised life.

The good news is, is that he doesn't leave us as compromised people either. It's not like Jesus is up there going, oh, you're compromised.

[ 25 : 49 ] Ah, I can't be bothered with you. You're useless. Jesus, Jezebel, this woman. You read in the passage that Jesus had been talking to her for a while.

You can hear the anguish in the passage when he talks about this woman, Jezebel. Despite the fact that she'd been leading people astray, he kept coming back to her going, Jezebel, come on, girl, come on, girl.

We've got to get this right. Repentance, forgiveness, come on, Jezebel. He doesn't embrace her ideas.

He doesn't accept her behavior. And clearly, the passage doesn't mess around. It says that if she continues in this path at some point, she continues to push Christ away, then eternally, Jesus will reject her.

But the good news is, Christ doesn't want to leave us in a compromised life now. And maybe he's talking to you about that tonight. So, how do we, how do we learn how to be, well, it's no, we must learn to be engaged in culture.

[ 27 : 06 ] We must be the best citizens. Jesus commends that, he encourages that. We must be like Pegman and Thyatira, out there. But we must do it without compromise.

And the way we do that is we must be willing to die. Amen.