



WORDS FROM CHRIST TO A CHURCH AT WAR **Revelation 2-3**

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

"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 witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

"I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

"I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God,

the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'" (Revelation 2:1-3:22).

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to Revelation 2. The first sermon I ever preached was in the eighth grade, and the text I chose was the letter from Christ to the church at Laodicea—the church to whom Jesus said, "I will spit you out of my mouth."

I walked up in front of the group of students and adults I was about to preach to with a bottle of water, and before I said anything else, I took a sip of my water and then proceeded to spew it out of my mouth and onto the front row of people who were sitting there. Then I looked at the crowd and said, "That's what God thinks of you if your faith is lukewarm." Needless to say, it was not a promising start to preaching.

Yet it does reflect some of the graphic imagery that we see in Revelation 2-3 as Jesus speaks to His church. Mark it down: Jesus does not pamper His people. He loves His people too much for that. He loves His people enough not only to comfort them, but to confront them. He loves His people enough to convict and cleanse and challenge them with stern warnings of impending judgment.

I've titled this text "Words from Christ to a Church at War." This is the reality lying behind the book of Revelation. Whether in the first century or the twenty-first century, the church is in a battle on a daily basis with sin and evil and suffering.

You are familiar with this. As a follower of Christ, you face temptation every day to turn from Christ, to compromise with Christ, to trust in yourself, to give into sin. All across this room, there are battles raging for marriages and homes and minds and hearts. In the last week alone, every day I have heard stories of marriages coming apart, ministers falling into moral failure, men and women in the church facing new bouts with physical suffering. And I have found myself freshly longing for the coming of Christ and the day when sin will be no more and suffering will be no more.

And that day is coming, but for now we're in the battle, in a war for our own souls and the souls of men and women all around us and all around the world who don't know Christ and His love and His mercy and His victory. We're in a battle that is happening here in each one

of our lives and in this church and in this world that is a part of a much larger battle between conflicting kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

So here we see Jesus walking amongst His churches in the midst of the battle, and He's speaking to them. He's calling them to hold fast, to endure with patience. To walk with purity amidst a world of sin and evil. And to live with a passion to proclaim the gospel, even when you're afraid and even when it may cost you your life. Because there's something greater than just your life here on earth that's at stake. Your life is at stake for eternity in this battle. Your eternal destiny lies in the balance and depends on how this battle plays out. The eternal destinies of nations lie in the balance and depend on how this battle plays out.

So Jesus does not play games. He comes to His church, and He speaks clearly to them about their spiritual state. He encourages and comforts them where they are enduring and trusting in Him and proclaiming the gospel. And He calls them out where they are compromising and their faith is waning. He warns them not to fall away. And in the end He promises that He is coming soon, and in light of that promise, He urges them to be ready.

So I want to do all of those things this morning. As we look at this text, I want you to be encouraged and comforted and strengthened in the battle. At the same time, I am praying that there would be deep conviction this morning for all who are giving into sin in various areas of your life and compromising in your relationship with Christ and with your witness in the world. I am praying that Christ would wake us up to see that He is King and Lord and Savior and Judge. He is coming soon, and He is bringing reward and He is bringing wrath depending on how we respond to Him today.

So what I've done is taken these letters to the seven churches and instead of looking at them one-by-one, we're going to look at them together, as a whole, and we're going to see how Jesus commends His church in these letters, how Jesus rebukes His church, what Jesus commands His church to do, and how Jesus warns His church. This all leads to Jesus' promise of reward for His church, for Christians who by God's grace through faith fight the battle faithfully to the end.

And I'm praying that God will use these letters from Christ to a church at war in the first century to speak clearly today to a church at war in the twenty-first century. I take great comfort from Revelation 3:22, where these letters close, and the Bible says, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" This is a clue for us that these words were not just for the churches at Ephesus and Smyrna and Pergamum and Thyatira and Sardis and Philadelphia and Laodicea. These are words to many more churches in the first century and to many more churches in the twenty centuries since then, including The Church at Brook Hills today. So let's have ears to hear this morning.

To every member of this church and to every Christian who is visiting with us in this church this morning, let's open our ears and listen to what the Lord Jesus is saying to us as His church. And for those of you who may not be a follower of Christ—you're not a Christian and yet you are here with us this morning—we welcome you. We invite you as you listen in on words from Jesus to His people, I pray that you will see a Savior who loves His people so much that He does not leave them alone in a world of sin and suffering but He draws them to Himself. My prayer is that you might be drawn to Him today, to know His love and to trust Him with your life now and forever.

Jesus knows us truly.

I put at the top of your notes a few truths to set the stage, a few reminders that we see all throughout these letters that I think will frame our journey this morning. Four reminders. Number one, Jesus knows us truly. Many of these letters begin with Jesus saying, "*I know your works...I know you.*" And the picture we see all throughout these letters is clear: Jesus knows his churches better than they know themselves.

This is most frighteningly clear in a church like Sardis in Chapter 3 where Jesus says, "*I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead*" (Revelation 3:1). That is a frightening verse. It is possible for a church to have all the signs of life, for people to look at a church and say, "That church is alive and active" and for Jesus to look at the same church and say, "Completely dead." It is possible for a church... Let me be more specific: it is possible for The Church at Brook Hills to look like it is alive to everyone around us in the world and for Jesus to say, "You're dead."

He alone knows us truly—as a church and as followers of Christ. We are all prone to spiritual deception. We are all prone to overestimate our spiritual condition, to think that we are fine when we may be far from it. So let's open our ears and ask Jesus, who knows us truly, to speak to us as a church and as followers of Christ, to show us our blind spots. Show us where we're fooling ourselves.

Remember the portrait of Jesus that we saw last week, and notice how that portrait is unpacked at the beginning of each of these letters. Last week we saw that Jesus was walking among the seven golden lampstands, and the first letter to the church at Ephesus depicts Him among the lampstands. Last week we saw Jesus declare that He is the first and the last, who died and lives forevermore, and that is exactly how He is introduced to the church in Smyrna. Last week we saw that Jesus's mouth proceeds like a two-edged sword, and that's the image that opens the letter to the church at Pergamum. And then when you get to Thyatira, you see Jesus with eyes like a flame of fire that see us truly and search us completely. Jesus sees who we truly are, so let us listen to Him.

Jesus loves us deeply.

Jesus knows us truly, and second truth here at the start, Jesus loves us deeply. What Jesus is doing in these letters is He's caring for His churches. Even in His most stern statements, He is calling them away from sin and destruction. "*Those whom I love,*" Jesus says, "*I reprove and discipline*" (Revelation 3:19). When a child is running into the street while a car is coming, it is a loving thing for a parent to yell out for that child to stop, to run after them and to warn them, "Don't run into the street!"

Jesus loves you, church. Jesus loves you, non-Christian. Jesus loves you and He knows that judgment is coming for sin, for your sin, so He graciously, mercifully, strongly, sternly calls you away from sin. Isn't it comforting to read these letters—and even amidst some of the stern, strong warnings—to hear Jesus holding out hope? He says to a church that He is ready to spew out of His mouth, "Repent, and we will eat and feast together." The very reason He speaks to these churches, even those that are in the worst shape, is to hold out hope to them. So hear, see, feel that hope for you this morning. Jesus loves us deeply.

Jesus guards us zealously.

He guards us zealously. Jesus guards His church zealously. He protects His church, He provides for His church, and He preserves His church. What a gracious gift that God has given us in these letters. To think that Jesus, two thousand years ago, revealed in this vision to John His words to His church so that 2000 years later, you and I have words from Christ to us as we struggle with sin and suffering in this world.

Jesus desires to protect us, to provide for us, to help you and me to persevere in the midst of the battles we are facing this week and this month and this year. We saw this last week. Jesus is present with us, among us today. He is speaking to us today through His Word, and He is guarding you today and keeping you today and pulling you back today and encouraging you to press on today. Jesus guards us zealously.

Jesus uses us purposefully.

And Jesus uses us purposefully. Jesus not only wants to sustain and strengthen us in the battle, He wants to send us out on a daily basis into the front lines of the battle so that others might know His mercy. So that others might know His grace. So that others might know His love as the One who died on the cross for our sins and is alive forevermore. His purpose in every one of our lives is not just to keep us in His kingdom; His purpose is to use us to advance His kingdom all over the world.

Jesus Commends His Church

So based on these truths—that Jesus knows us truly, He loves us deeply, He guards us zealously, and He uses us purposefully—let’s think about how Jesus commends His church here. Now He tells John to write these letters to angels who represent each church. Some suspect that this is a reference to pastors in these different churches, but most believe that the picture here is basically an angelic representative of each of these churches.

Obviously, Jesus addresses specific things in each church. But don’t forget that the book of Revelation was written for the sake of all these churches, and all these churches would hear (or read) what Jesus said to the other churches. So it’s not like Ephesus just got Revelation 2:1-7; they got the whole thing. And so as Jesus speaks specifically to certain situations in churches, He’s also speaking generally to all His church—then and today.

So how does Jesus commend His church? In four primary ways in these letters.

For faithful perseverance in the Word of Christ.

Number one, Jesus commends His church for faithful perseverance in the Word of Christ. This is one of the key themes throughout the book of Revelation, and it’s evident from the start of these letters as Jesus commends the Ephesian Christians for their toil and patient endurance in the Word.

In fact, circle or underline this phrase. It’s mentioned four times in these seven letters—you see “patient endurance” or “enduring patiently” mentioned. I want you to see the emphasis here.

At the very beginning of this chapter, Revelation 2:2. In the letter to Ephesus, Jesus says, “*I know your works, your toil and your [underline it there] patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.*” Then look at verse 3. “*I know you are [here it is again] enduring patiently...*” So underline it or circle it there. Patient endurance, enduring patiently. Two times in the letter to the church at Ephesus.

Then you get to Smyrna and the idea is there. This is a church that is enduring in the middle of persecution and death. Then the church at Pergamum, also not denying their faith in the midst of struggle. Then you get to Thyatira. Look at Revelation 2:19. Jesus says to

the church at Thyatira, "*I know your works, your love and faith and service and [what?] patient endurance...*" Circle it there.

Then you keep going to chapter 3, come to Sardis, where there is not as much to commend (except for a few people), but then you get to Philadelphia, and you see this one more time in verse Revelation 3:10. Jesus says to the church at Philadelphia, "*Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world...*" Circle or underline "patient endurance" there. Patient endurance. Let that phrase stick out in your mind. Patient endurance, faithful perseverance in the Word of Christ.

Now this plays out in a couple of different ways. On one hand, these first-century Christians are commended by Christ for guarding the church internally. This was the case particularly in Ephesus back at the beginning of Chapter 2. They did not tolerate evil teaching and heretical teachers in the church. The church at Ephesus, Revelation 2:6 says, hated false teaching and worked zealously to keep it from infiltrating the church. They tested leaders to make sure that their teaching was true and faithful to God's Word, and when it was not, they addressed it seriously. They did not grow weary in guarding the church from falsehood.

Jesus commends them for guarding the church internally and for advancing the church externally. Now this wasn't as much the case at Ephesus, which we'll see in a minute, but it was the case in cities like Pergamum where they endured as faithful witnesses to Christ in the world, even to the point of death.

For faithful proclamation of the name of Christ.

Which leads to the second thing Jesus commends His church for—not just for faithful perseverance in the Word of Christ, but also for faithful proclamation of the name of Christ. There at Pergamum, they're living in the middle of Satan's throne, and Antipas is killed for faithfully proclaiming the name of Christ.

There was faithful proclamation of Christ in light of opportunity that Christ presented to them. To the church at Philadelphia, Jesus says, "*I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut*" (Revelation 3:8). A door to the kingdom of God that the church at Philadelphia had not only walked through, but a door that they were leading others—particularly Jewish people—to walk through, even though they were facing persecution for it.

So Jesus commends His church for faithful proclamation of His name in light of opportunity and in the midst of opposition from all sides (religious, governmental, social, and economic). When you look at the circumstances in each of these cities, you realize very quickly that it was not popular to proclaim the name of Christ, and great cost came to those who faithfully proclaimed him.

In cities like Pergamum and Smyrna and Philadelphia, you see opposition from Jewish synagogues who were slandering Christians and reporting Christians to the Roman authorities for being cultic. That led to governmental opposition from the Roman Empire, for Christians would not bow to Caesar or give in to emperor worship that was common, and in many senses required, throughout that day. It was treasonous not to bow the knee to Rome.

Then there was economic opposition. The church in Smyrna was impoverished precisely because of their proclamation of the name of Christ. Here's the way this worked. In most of these cities, you had trade guilds that it was imperative for a worker in a particular trade to

be a part of. So if you were a merchant or a baker or a potter, then you would be a part of a guild with other merchants, bakers, or potters. Each guild had its own patron god or goddess, and there would be frequent feasts among the guilds where offerings would be given to the god or goddess of that guild. All of this was intertwined into the setup of the guild, which was economically and socially advantageous to be a part of, almost necessary to be a part of. But followers of Christ faithfully persevering in the Word and faithfully proclaiming the name could not be a part of these guilds and be involved in the practice of these guilds. And it cost them—money and jobs and livelihood for families. Economic opposition and social opposition. Jesus recognizes the slander against Christians at Smyrna for holding fast to God’s truth and proclaiming God’s Son, Jesus, as the Messiah.

Let me pause very briefly here and just point out the word there is here for us today in our culture. It is increasingly common in our culture for Christians who believe the Bible and who proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation to be labeled dangerous and evil. To proclaim this Word in our culture today leads to charges of being anti-gay or anti-choice or anti-women or anti-intellectual or anti-diversity or intolerant and ignorant and arrogant.

The more steadfastly you and I today hold fast to the Word of Christ and proclaim the name of Christ in our culture, the more opposition will come from all sides—religious, governmental, social, and economic. And there will be increasing temptation to shrink back from the Word and the name of Christ. And Jesus, just as He called His church in the first century, is calling you and me in the twenty-first century to faithfully persevere in His Word and faithfully proclaim His name in light of opportunity and in the midst of opposition.

For trusting God amidst testing in the world.

That’s not easy, but that’s why Jesus commends His churches here for trusting God amidst testing in the world. Go to the letter to Smyrna in Revelation 2:10 and see what Jesus says there. They’re experiencing suffering and poverty and slander as they proclaim Christ, and Jesus says to them, *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”* (Revelation 2:10). What an astounding verse.

Why is God letting the devil throw his children into jail and to kill some of them? So that they may be tested. What’s being tested? you might ask. And the answer is: faithfulness to Jesus is being tested. Will they be faithful unto death? Will these Christians trust God even when they’re taken from their families, thrown into prison, and they come face-to-face with death? Will they still trust God?

So follow this. God allows—in some senses ordains—Satan to cause suffering for the testing of saints. It’s what we’ve seen all throughout the Bible: Joseph in the book of Genesis, Job, Jesus in the wilderness, Paul given a thorn in the flesh (a messenger of Satan to torment him). God allows, and even ordains, these things ultimately for our good.

So follow this. Satan is subordinate, and he intends suffering to sabotage us. So remember, Satan is on a leash, and he can do nothing outside of the sovereign permission and ultimate purpose of God. And all throughout these letters, we see Satan trying to sabotage the church. The synagogue of Satan, the devil is about to throw you into prison. You live where Satan’s throne is, where Satan dwells, heretical teachings in the church are the deep things of Satan. Satan is sabotaging the church and Christians here, and he’s doing the same thing all over this room. He is tempting, pulling away, discouraging, attempting to defeat. This is not some fairy tale cartoon; this is real. There are spiritual forces of evil that want to

sabotage your faith through suffering. They want to use trials in your life (physically, spiritually, relationally, of all kinds) to sabotage you.

But God is sovereign, and he uses suffering to sanctify us. So Jesus says, "You're going to be tested...for ten days you will have tribulation...be faithful unto death...trust God amidst testing...and I will give you the crown of life." This is for your good! I know you don't understand it, and it's a mystery to you why these things are happening, but trust God, persevere in faith, don't stop proclaiming Christ even if it costs you everything, don't stop proclaiming him for you know that the crown of life is coming. And that's exactly what happened at the church at Smyrna.

The story is told of Polycarp, the second-century bishop of the church of Smyrna, who would have been very familiar with this letter from Christ to his church. At 86 years old he was told by the Roman governor that if he would not recant his faith and acknowledge Caesar as Lord, that he would be killed. If only Polycarp would offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue, he would escape torture and death. But Polycarp said, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He has never done me any wrong. How could I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" Steadfast in his stand for Christ, at 86 years old, Polycarp was burned alive at the stake. God, give us grace to trust God amidst 86 years of testing in this world.

For loving God amidst temptation from the world.

Finally, these churches were commended for loving God amidst temptation from the world, for walking in purity. Picture the few names in Sardis who have not soiled their garments in the sin of the world, but have walked with Christ in a manner worthy of His name. So these are the things for which Jesus commends His church.

Jesus Rebukes His Church

At the same time in these letters Jesus rebukes His church, and I've identified two main causes of rebuke in these seven letters, though really only five of the churches are rebuked. Christ does not specifically rebuke the church at Smyrna or the church at Philadelphia. But the other five churches are rebuked for two main reasons.

For compromise.

One, for compromise. We've already seen that there was great pressure from all sides—religious pressure, governmental pressure, social pressure, and economic pressure—that quite simply led the people of God to settle for less than what God had called them to.

There was compromise in the church in two primary forms. One, tolerance of evil (idolatry and immorality). We see talk about the Nicolaitans. We don't know exactly all that the Nicolaitans were teaching, but we do know that what they were teaching somehow encouraged and cultivated idolatry and sexual immorality. In Pergamum, Jesus says in 2:14, "*You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality*" (Rev. 2:14).

In Thyatira, Chapter 2, verse 20, we see the people of God being seduced into practicing sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols. And the root of this tolerance of evil was tolerance of error (false teaching and false teachers) because there were teachers in the church who were condoning such idolatry and immorality.

I mentioned earlier the temptation to compromise with these trade guilds, to participate in these feasts with food dedicated to false gods. These teachers were saying, "Oh, it's no big deal. If you don't want to lose your job or your business over this, participate in the feast. It will be good for your witness." Teachers who were spreading falsehood and leading Christians to compromise in the church. Teachers who were indulging in immorality yet being tolerated, and even supported and listened to, in the church. The church is rebuked for tolerating evil (idolatry and immorality) and error (false teaching and false teachers) in the church.

Such compromise in the church inevitably led to compromise with the world. These churches began to look just like their cities. There was no distinction between the church and the pagan culture surrounding the church because of compromise. Compromise on a variety of levels for a variety of reasons: For the sake of financial gain, social acceptance, and personal safety.

They came up with all kinds of ways to justify idolatry and immorality in the world. After all, you need to provide for your family, which means you need to belong to one of these guilds. And yes, that implies worship of a false god, but you know that's not your heart. And when that guild festival leads into all kinds of immorality, you would dishonor the host by walking out and shame yourself, lose face in the process, lose your influence that you can have for Christ. And if you're not careful, you'll be brought before the Roman governor and killed. What kind of witness can you have then if you're dead? So it became very easy for the church to blend in with the world.

Clearly, there is a word here for us today. It is easy, Christian, to blend in with the world—in subtle, seemingly justifiable ways. It is alarmingly evident that the lifestyles of followers of Jesus Christ are often virtually indistinguishable from the lifestyles of our neighbors, and such compromise is tragic in the church.

For the sake of financial gain: compromise with the materialism of this world may be the most serious sin in our church today. For the sake of social acceptance: isn't this one of the primary reasons (if not the primary reason) why we do not actively share the gospel (the fear of man)? And personal safety: surely this is one of the reasons we sit back in comfort and ease while hundreds of millions of people starve and suffer spiritually and physically around the world.

For complacency.

Jesus rebukes his church for compromise and for complacency. Lack of love, Jesus says to Ephesus. Lukewarm faith, Jesus says to Laodicea. Now this picture in Laodicea is particularly interesting. People often read this and assume that Jesus is saying, "Cold is bad and hot is good, and I wish you were one or the other. Either cold (against me) or with a heart that is hot (on fire for me)."

But I don't believe that's what Jesus is saying. Laodicea was a city with two primary sources of water. Six miles to the north was the city of Hierapolis, home to hot springs that were a source of healing and balm. Ten miles to the east was Colosse, a city known for its cold drinking water. Hot was good in Hierapolis, and cold was good in Colosse. But water that was neither healing or refreshing—lukewarm water—was good for nothing. And that's the point.

The church at Laodicea had such an ineffective, apathetic faith that it was good for absolutely nothing, and Jesus says, "Do you realize that you make me sick?" Why such a

strong statement? Follow this. Because this was a church marked by self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency.

These were wealthy Christians in a wealthy city who had everything they needed. The city was so wealthy that when a major earthquake devastated the city in A.D. 60, they refused help from Rome and rebuilt their city themselves with their resources. And the city was extravagant—a gymnasium, stadium with a long track, a triple gate and towers, beautiful buildings—and the church reflected the city. Just as the city perceived no need for help from Rome, the church perceived no need for help from God. It is a dangerous thing for God's people to have everything they could want or need in this world, for without realizing it, they begin to think that they don't need God. And they begin to wane in their want for God. They had succumbed to the lure of physical prosperity, and they had no idea the depth of their spiritual poverty. Jesus says to the church, "I am on the outside looking in," and you have not invited me in.

This complacency is echoed elsewhere in a failure to complete the works of God and failure to confess the Word of God. Jesus says to Sardis, "I have not found your works complete." In other words, you have settled for less than all-obedience. You are apathetic and okay with half-hearted obedience to the commands that feel most comfortable to you.

And the one that comes up over and over again in these letters, what is likely the most dominant rebuke to each of these churches (that are rebuked) is a failure to confess the Word of God to the world around them. So here's the deal. These churches are commended and rebuked for a variety of things, but if you had to nail down one theme, one thing, that characterizes all of these commendations and rebukes, they all revolve around confessing God's Word and carrying out God's mission in the world.

This was the problem at the first church Ephesus. Do you remember? They were holding tight to the Word in the church, guarding the church internally. But they had abandoned the love they had at first. Notice—not their first love in terms of their primary love. But the love they had at first, the love they used to have.

Well, what does that mean? Love for God? Well, certainly that's the foundation, but there's more here. You look back at Ephesus, and you see in Acts 19:10 that Paul preached the Word of God every day in the hall of Tyrannus, in public, in Ephesus. The Bible tells us that he did this for two years, *"so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."*

And you may remember (we studied this a year-and-a-half ago now) but the picture in Acts 19 was people hearing the Word of God at Ephesus from Paul and then going out literally all over Asia spreading the Word of God. Loving people enough to tell them that Jesus had died on the cross and risen from the grave to save men and women from their sin. Because of their love for people, they shared the Word of God with them. And Jesus says in Revelation 2, you've lost it. You're holding tight to the Word in the church, but you've lost your love for the people outside the church that need to hear this Word.

And that was the problem in most of these churches. In light of the cost of confessing the Word of God, they were sitting back, coasting things out in a life of compromise and complacency. The two churches that are only commended by Christ (Smyrna and Philadelphia) are commended why? Because they were confessing the Word of God, even though it was costing them greatly.

Is there a Word for us here, Church at Brook Hills, in all of this? Compromise is so easy, so justifiable, and it's happening all across this room, isn't it? Complacency is so subtle and so dangerous. We are lured daily by the world around us into self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency, and we are not confessing the Word of God in love for people around us who don't know Christ. So what shall we do?

Jesus Commands His Church

Remember...

Jesus commands His church three things. First of all, remember who you are and what Jesus says. To Ephesus and Sardis both, Jesus says: remember who you are in Christ, what you've received from Christ, what you've heard from Jesus. Remember His Word, hear it. Don't turn your ears from it, don't pretend like everything is okay. Listen to Jesus.

Repent...

And repent. Turn from sin and trust in Jesus. Oh, see the grace of God here. Jesus does not yet write off any of these churches. He tells them over and over again. They've got different issues, different struggles, but the remedy is the same in all of them: repent. And Jesus gives time to repent.

See His grace today, giving you time to repent. Turn from sin. Stop toying with sin. Flee sin. Stop! Stop compromising! Stop compromising and repent of complacency.

Oh, I was so convicted this week of my own complacency, my own self-sufficiency and our self-sufficiency as a church. We as elders had a retreat these last two days, and we reflected on Jesus' letters to these churches and listened to what Jesus is saying to us. When it comes to weaknesses, these things seemed to be at the top of the list a prideful prayerlessness.

I told them how I was convicted both personally and pastorally when studying this and seeing Laodicea. I read one commentary on this text, applying self-sufficiency to our prayer lives, and it said:

"The essence of lukewarmness is the statement, 'I need nothing.' The lukewarm are spiritually self-satisfied. To find out whether you are among that number, don't look into your head to see if you think that you are needy; rather, look at your prayer life. It doesn't matter what we think in our head, the test of whether we are in bondage to spiritual self-satisfaction is how earnest and frequent and extended our prayers for change are. Do you seek the Lord earnestly and often in secret for deeper knowledge of Christ, for greater earnestness in prayer, for more boldness in witness, for sweeter joy in the Holy Spirit, for deeper sorrow for sin, for warmer compassion for the lost, for more divine power to love? Or is the coolness and perfunctoriness of your prayer life Exhibit A that you are spiritually self-satisfied and lukewarm?"

I, we need to repent of this. And to repent of complacency that is keeping us from confessing the Word of God, sharing the gospel of God all over this city. May it not be said of The Church at Brook Hills that we care more about the nations than we do our neighbors. May we love our neighbors enough to confess the Word of God to them. Repent, repent, repent, Church, Christian, for compromise and complacency.

Receive...

Repent and receive. Receive from Christ, hear His gracious invitation to Laodicea, hear it to us. Find your treasure in Jesus. "Buy from me gold," Jesus says. Clothe your life in Jesus. "Buy from me ... white garments to clothe yourself." And fix your eyes on Jesus. "Salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see" (Rev 3:18). "Come to Me for these things," Jesus says. There's only one place to find treasure and life and truth. "It's in Me, receive from Me," Jesus commands. What a gracious, merciful command.

Jesus Warns His Church

And as He offers these commands, Jesus warns His church. Now you may be struck by the sternness of these warnings, and I hope you are. Revelation 2:5, "*Unless you repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*" Lampstand is symbolic of the church. What's that about? Revelation 2:16, "*If you do not repent, I will come to you soon and war against you with the sword of my mouth.*" This is Jesus speaking to His church.

Revelation 2:22-23, "*If she refuses to repent, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead.*" Revelation 3:3, "*If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.*" I'm coming like a burglar against you. Revelation 3:16, "*I will spit you out of my mouth.*"

These are startling verses that seem to imply that these Christians are in danger of being rejected by Christ. So what's going on here? Follow with me, this is key. Jesus is doing what we see all throughout Scripture:

God gives warnings to Christians about falling away to keep Christians from falling away.

God gives warnings to Christians about falling away to keep Christians from falling away. There are passages in the Bible like these—warnings about Christians falling away—that cause some people to conclude that Christians can lose their salvation. Passages like Hebrews 3:11-14:

"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end" (Heb. 3:11-14).

That passage seems to imply that it is possible for Christians to lose their salvation. But don't miss the context—both in Hebrews 3 and here in Revelation. These passages are not written to Christians who are thriving in their faith to say, "One day you might fall away." No, these passages are written to Christians who are wavering in their faith, and God is saying to them, to you and me when we are wavering, "Don't fall away." And this kind of warning keeps us from falling away. It's one of the means God uses to draw us back to Himself and to keep us from continuing to waver.

By grace through faith, true followers of Christ will persevere to the end.

Let me put it this way—I don't want you to be confused on this—by grace through faith, true followers of Christ will persevere to the end. Everyone who is born again will be preserved to the end.

This is guaranteed by God the Father. 1 Peter 1:3-5, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."*

This is ensured by God the Son. John 10:27-29, *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."*

And it's accomplished through God the Spirit. Ephesians 1:13-14, *"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."*

So the whole Trinity is involved in this thing, in keeping followers of Christ to the end. And the way He keeps you and me is sometimes by warning you and me. In those times when we are wandering slightly from God, wavering in our obedience to Him, trust in Him. He gives us good and gracious warnings to keep us from falling away. But that doesn't mean we just sit back and coast things out as followers of Christ because God is going to keep us to the end.

By grace through faith, true followers of Christ work to persevere to the end.

No, by grace through faith, true followers of Christ work to persevere to the end. The Christian life nowhere in the Bible is depicted as coasting down a smooth hill with the breeze blowing through your hair. No, the Christian life is a race that you run. It's a war, a battle that is fought all the way to the end.

This is over all Scripture. Matthew 24:13, *"But the one who endures to the end will be saved."* Hebrews 3:14, *"For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."* Hebrews 10:36, *"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised."*

Now you might think, "What about those who don't endure? What about those who fall away and don't come back?" We likely know people who at one point confessed faith in Christ as Christians who today want nothing to do with Christ, are walking in total disobedience to Christ, maybe even completely denying Christ. What about them?

1 John 2:19 speaks of such people, saying, *"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."* That's why I emphasize true followers of Christ here.

There are many people—and there were some, maybe even many, in these seven churches—who were embracing false teaching and living in idolatry and immorality who would have claimed to be Christians. But even after these warnings, they would not repent, they would not listen, and in their rebellion they would show that they were not truly followers of Jesus in the first place.

So Christian, let Jesus' warnings here be a wake up call to you to return to Him, to refuse to settle for compromise and complacency in your life in any way. And at the same time, if you

profess to be a Christian, yet you refuse to repent and walk with him, be very concerned about your soul. I urge you, do not ignore his voice. Turn to him, either for the first time truly or return to him as his child and experience His reward.

Jesus closes every one of these letters with a promise for the persevering Christian. Repent and walk in faithful obedience to the Word of Christ, holding fast faithfully to the name of Christ, trusting God amidst testing in this world and loving God amidst temptation from the world, and experience His reward.

Jesus Rewards His Church

Each letter ends with the promise of eternal life depicted in beautiful ways. Jesus rewards His church, He promises reward. To Smyrna and Philadelphia, this promise is portrayed as total vindication of Christ's ways in this world. "You are slandered and persecuted by the synagogue of Satan," Jesus says, "but it will become clear that I am the true Messiah and the Savior of all." People will say that you are foolish for going to prison and dying for your faith. They will say that such faith is nonsense, but in the end it will be clear that such faith is the only thing that makes sense.

See this, brothers and sisters! Let's live differently than the world around us. Let's turn things upside down. We live according to different values, we have different priorities in our life that make us look very different in our culture around us. To the culture around us, it makes us look foolish. Go extreme in your obedience to Christ. Go and proclaim the gospel of Christ, proclaim the name of Christ. You've got a "blank check" on the table. You're letting go of possessions and priorities and plans and dreams to make the glory of Christ known in Birmingham and all nations, and you will look weird in this culture. But one day, a day is coming, when it's going to be clear that was the only kind of life that made sense. And anything less than that is going to be shown to be foolish. Compromise with materialism for social acceptance, compromise for personal safety. One day this is going to be shown to be very, very foolish.

Total vindication of Christ's ways in this world, and triumphant victory over Satan's powers in this world. At the end of every letter (you can go back and look at it), you see one phrase: "*to the one who conquers.*"

This is one of the primary themes of the entire book of Revelation: conquering, overcoming the evil one through faith in Christ, triumphant victory that will last forever.

Total vindication, triumphant victory, and secure protection from the horror of hell. Revelation 2:11, "*The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.*" Your name, Revelation 3:5 says, is in the book of life! You are secure, Jesus says to Philadelphia, "*a pillar in the temple of my God*" (Rev. 3:12). More than any other of these cities, Philadelphia was constantly barraged by earthquakes, and as a result, many of the people had to move outside the city because it was dangerous to live inside the city. And Jesus says, you are coming to a city that can never be shaken.

Secure protection and shared participation in the reign of Christ. A crown of life, I will grant you to sit with me on my throne, where we will have authority over the nations. What language! Identified with Christ, sharing His name, His presence, His authority, and His reign.

Total vindication, triumphant victory, secure protection from the horror of hell, shared participation in the reign of Christ, and permanent citizenship in the city of God. Dwelling with God, in His city, with His name. A new Jerusalem where the old is gone and the new has come. And you will belong there forever and ever and ever. And not only belong there, but feast there!

Look at how many of these promises use language of feasting! You will "*eat of the tree of life*" (Rev. 2:7) and are given "*hidden manna*" (Rev. 2:17) and an invitation to eat with Christ (Rev. 3:20). Hear the promise of Jesus. For all who faithfully persevere to the end by grace through faith, there awaits perpetual celebration in the presence of God.

* NOTE: A list of additional resources to assist you in further study of the book of Revelation and eschatology are available as a PDF download at Radical.net/Revelation. Click on the "Materials" button under any message in the series for this and other weekly resources.

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By David Platt. © David Platt & Radical. Website: Radical.net