

“ . . . what the Spirit says  
to the churches . . . ”

Part Two/Revelation 2:1-3:22

***[I am indebted to Tommy South for the main points of this sermon. See, “Christ’s Concerns for the Church,” in Truth for Today]***

1. Well, the holiday season is upon us.
2. But for some of us, before we can celebrate Christmas . . . we’ve got to survive FINALS.
3. That’s right, REPORT CARDS – at least at Harding – will go out right about the time the fat man does.
4. And they will not bring good tidings of great joy for *all* people.
5. Now, some will . . . some will show evidence of endurance, hard work, and victory.
6. Others will signify complete failure.
7. And still others will suggest the need for improvement . . . the grades aren’t *bad*, but they aren’t all that *good*, either . . . some things will really need to change before next semester . . . or else.
8. REPORT CARDS . . . are kind of what we’re reading in Revelation 2 and 3.
9. The exiled Apostle John was commanded . . .

## REVELATION 1:11

“Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”



10. What he wrote was kind of like a REPORT CARD for each church.
11. Now, why these seven churches?
  - a. We don't know exactly.
  - b. We know that there were more than seven churches in Asia Minor.
  - c. And so we suspect that these SEVEN – seven, you know, is a highly symbolic number in Revelation – were in some way(s) symbolic . . . or representative . . . of what the church was facing then, and of what it continues to face today.
12. If they hadn't already, these churches were about to face a period of severe testing, and to pass the test, they would have to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus . . . they would have to trust him come what may.
13. The vision of Jesus that John saw in chapter one assured them that Jesus was with them . . . that he was among them . . . to COMFORT them, to ENCOURAGE them, and to SUSTAIN them.
14. But he was also among them to INSPECT them, to PREPARE them, and to WARN them (Shelly, 29).
15. And he told John to report what he saw.
16. Two of the churches – Smyrna and Philadelphia – showed evidence of endurance, hard work, and victory despite their present circumstances.
17. One of the churches – Laodicea – was a complete failure.
18. And the rest . . . there was good and there was bad . . . there was definite room for improvement.

19. Now, all of the reports all follow the same general pattern . . .

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- † An ADDRESS to the church’s “angel”
- † A DESCRIPTION of Jesus drawn from the earlier vision
- † A COMMENDATION (for all but Laodicea)
- † A CONDEMNATION (for all but Smyrna and Philadelphia)
- † A CHALLENGE (exhortation/warning)
- † An eschatological PROMISE to those who conquer (are faithful)
- † An INVITATION to heed the Spirit

- a. First, there is an ADDRESS to the church’s “angel.”
  - 1) This is probably a reference to the church’s guardian angel who represents the congregation in heaven.
- b. Then there is a DESCRIPTION of Jesus drawn from that picture of him in chapter one.
  - 1) Particular features communicate particular things to particular churches.
- c. Next there is a COMMENDATION.
  - 1) Jesus says that he knows the good work that is ongoing in each church . . . except in Laodicea.
  - 2) There is no commendation for the church in Laodicea.
- d. Then there is a CONDEMNATION.
  - 1) Jesus says he knows what needs to be dealt with in each church . . . except in Smyrna and Philadelphia.
  - 2) Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no condemnation.
- e. Next comes a CHALLENGE, either to hold fast to the good or fix the bad.
- f. Then a PROMISE to those who conquer.
- g. And finally there is an INVITATION to heed what the Spirit is saying to the church.

20. Now, it's a fascinating study to go city by city and church by church through these two chapters.

- a. And that is what many sermon series do . . . paying attention to the local color that is presented about each city.
- b. It's fascinating, but it's not really necessary.
- c. Because all of these letters really address the same things . . . the coming PERSECUTION and the temptation to COMPROMISE in the face of persecution.
- d. And that's what all of these letters are really about.

21. So our approach is going to be a bit different.

22. We're going to look at the BIG PICTURE this morning.

23. There are some THEMES identified in these REPORTS . . . let me show you . . . first

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† About their NEEDS.

#### 24. JESUS REPORTS ABOUT THEIR NEEDS.

- a. Some of these churches are really hurting, and so Jesus lets them know that he is FULLY AWARE of their suffering.
- b. The Christians at Smyrna were undergoing tribulation, poverty, and slander . . . some were about to be imprisoned (2:9-10).
- c. A brother by the name of Antipas had already been murdered at Pergamum (2:13).
- d. And the church in Philadelphia was being pressured by their Jewish opponents to deny the name of Jesus . . . John calls the opponents members of ***“the synagogue of Satan”*** (3:8-9).
- e. In each case the Lord says, “I know.”
- f. What a comfort it is to *know* that that *he knows* . . . and that *he cares!*
- g. In each case he promises (1) to supply every need, and (2) to enable the church to withstand every test and to meet every opportunity.
- h. Paul echoes this great truth in Philippians 4:19 . . .

## **Philippians 4:19**

**And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.**

- i. This is a promise that every Christian and every church in every age needs to claim.
- j. Whatever the obstacle or opportunity, God in Christ and through the Spirit will supply whatever we need.
- k. This is ought to be the first factor to be considered in all our decisions, plans, and struggles.
- l. Before we in a congregation count our members, check our bank balance, or list of all the reasons why something can't be done, we should remind ourselves that the Lord knows what we need, and that he will supply our every need.

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† About their FAITH.

## 25. JESUS ALSO REPORTS ABOUT THEIR FAITH.

- a. Now, I'm not talking about faith as cognitive assent here.
- b. I'm talking about THE FAITH – what we believe and practice.
- c. These seven letters reveal that CHRIST IS CONCERNED ABOUT WHAT WE BELIEVE . . . WHAT WE BELIEVE DETERMINES HOW WE LIVE.
- d. In the first letter, he commends the Ephesians for not tolerating false apostles (2:2).
- e. On the other hand, the church in Pergamum is being way too tolerant of false teachers.
  - 1) Some there held to ***“the teaching of Balaam”*** (Numbers 22-25), and others held to the teachings of the Nicolaitans.
  - 2) It may very well be that these groups are related.
  - 3) It seems that they held very liberal views concerning Christian social engagement and sexual immorality.
- f. Contrary to the belief of many today, Jesus says there is TRUTH and that there is ERROR, and that it does matter what we believe.
- g. God has not called us to gullibility, but to truth-seeking . . . He has not called us to become “all things to all people” at the expense of our morality!



- h. The Lord expects us to hold to the truth regardless of the consequences.
- i. In these seven letters, it is clear that persecution is no excuse for doctrinal compromise.
- j. The APOSTOLIC FAITH was the reason for these peoples' sufferings (1:19; 2:13), and yet they were told, "DO NOT LET GO OF IT!".
- k. How much less excuse is there for those of us who have never been persecuted, if we fail to seek and hold fast the truth of God's Word!
- l. And it's not that all of these Christians were being tempted to completely renounce the faith.
- m. They were, however, being tempted to ACCOMMODATE . . . to COMPROMISE . . . to GIVE IN . . . in order to be accepted in their communities.
- n. They didn't want to be labeled as INTOLERANT BIGOTS . . . and they wanted to be able to do business in their hometowns.
- o. Well, the Christians in these cities are called to stand firm in the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints, even if it meant severe SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, and POLITICAL consequences.

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- † About their NEEDS.
- † About their FAITH.
- † About their LIFESTYLE.

## **26. JESUS ALSO REPORTS ABOUT THEIR LIFESTYLE.**

- a. The church at Ephesus had allowed their love to grow cold and their works to diminish (2:4-5).
  - 1) If there's one of these letters that we ought to study on its own, it's this one . . . or maybe the one to Laodicea.
  - 2) The church in Ephesus was really good at exposing and denouncing false teachers.
  - 3) They were not really good at loving people.
  - 4) They were good at TRUTH, but not at GRACE . . . sound familiar?
- b. Thyatira was full of good works, but they were tolerating immorality (2:19-20).
- c. The Lord soundly chastises them both . . .
  - a. Being “on fire” for the Lord is not a license for blind tolerance and moral negligence.
  - b. And having the “corner on the market of truth” does not give you the right to be a jerk.
- d. These letters remind us that Christianity can never be just a theory that we hold . . . it must be a lifestyle that we consistently practice . . . a lifestyle characterized by TRUTH and LOVE.
- e. Christ is concerned about our morals, our values, our entertainments, how we do business – everything about how we use and order our lives.
- f. And, again, there's a warning here about ACCOMMODATION and COMPROMISE.
- g. The Roman Empire was TOLERANT . . . for the most part . . . as long as you played their games.
- h. But if you refused, well, then you became a threat to the status quo, and you had to be silenced.
- i. Brothers and Sisters, TOLERANCE has never been the highest virtue in the Kingdom of God – in human kingdoms, yes – but God prizes TRUTH and LOVE and FAITHFULNESS.

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- † About their NEEDS.
- † About their FAITH.
- † About their LIFESTYLE.
- † About their REPENTANCE.

**27. JESUS ALSO REPORTS ABOUT THEIR CAPACITY FOR REPENTANCE.**

- a. There are numerous calls for repentance in these letters . . . from hatefulness, immorality, lifelessness, doctrinal compromise, and from luke-warmness (2:5, 16, 21-23; 3:3 ,19).
  - 1) Let me say just a word about being LUKEWARM.
  - 2) . . .
- b. Church . . . *are we pliable . . . are we willing to change?*
- c. Are we willing to allow the Lord to mold, shape, and correct us as needed, or are we being molded, shaped, and corrected by our culture?
- d. Will we confess our sins and admit our errors?
- e. Our capacity for repentance is absolutely vital if we are to be the Lord's people.
- f. That's why each letter calls the church to HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING.
- g. *Just As I Am* is one of our most beloved hymns.
- h. Perhaps we have misunderstood it to mean, "just as I am, because I am not about to change."
- i. Read it again . . . can we still repent?
- j. Jesus wants to know.

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- † About their NEEDS.
- † About their FAITH.
- † About their LIFESTYLE.
- † About their capacity for REPENTANCE.
- † About their SURVIVAL.

## 28. FINALLY, JESUS REPORTS ABOUT THEIR CHANCES FOR SURVIVAL.

- a. Survival – spiritual survival – is what all of the other concerns are about.
- b. A church can only survive spiritually if it is faithful, pure, pliable, and depending upon the Lord to supply its needs.
- c. So Jesus calls the Christians at Smyrna to, ***“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”*** (2:10).
- d. He tells the church in Thyatira, ***“Only hold fast to what you have until I come”*** (2:25).
- e. And the Philadelphians are encouraged . . . ***“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”*** (3:10-11).
- f. Sometimes in all of our rhetoric about “spiritual victory” we forget that for many struggling Christians, spiritual survival is victory.
- g. We may not make it to “the mountaintop,” but if we just hold on to our faith, we will be victorious.
- h. The church can survive persecution . . . that has been proven time and time again.

- i. The real question is . . . **can we survive popularity and prosperity?**
- j. Will having it easy be our undoing?
- k. In his book *Dropping Your Guard*, Charles Swindoll tells a story that ought to serve as a warning to every church in America today:

When I lived in Atlanta, several years ago, I noticed in the Yellow Pages, in the listing of restaurants, an entry for a place called "Church of God Grill." The peculiar name aroused my curiosity and I dialed the number. A man answered with a cheery, "Hello! Church of God Grill." I asked how his restaurant had been given such an unusual name, and he told me: "Well, we had a little mission down here, and we started selling chicken dinners after church on Sunday to help pay the bills. Well, people liked the chicken, and we did such a good business, that eventually we cut back on the church service. After a while we just closed down the church altogether and kept on serving chicken dinners. We kept the name we started with, and that is 'Church of God Grill.'"

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29. Jesus Christ is concerned about his church.
30. If these seven letters teach us nothing else, they teach us that Christ is concerned about the LOCAL CHURCH . . . about who we are and what we do.
31. And so he writes these REPORT CARDS to PRISE them, to WARN them, and to ENCOURAGE them to be what he has called them to be
32. And that’s the thing about REPORT CARDS . . . they indicate both what the teacher is concerned about, and what the students have been concerned about.
33. We can see in these letters what Christ is concerned about for his church.
34. And as long as we are concerned about the same things, all will be well.
35. Jesus wants us to be victorious.
36. And he knows just what we need to be so.
37. We must continue to hold fast to our FAITH . . . come what may.
38. We must continue to live lives consistent with the GOSPEL . . . even if doing so takes us out of step with our society.
39. And we must be willing to REPENT of those things that take us out of step with our God.
40. I am begging you this morning to HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES.
41. What he says to the churches he is saying TO YOU.
42. What does your REPORT CARD look like?
43. Does it show evidence of endurance and faithfulness that lead to victory?
44. Does it signify complete failure?
45. Does it suggest areas of improvement?
46. There are really only two options.
47. Consider this mid-term . . . And the final could occur at any moment.
48. Make the corrections you need to make before it’s too late.
49. Some of you still need to enroll in the class . . .
50. Whatever you need, won’t you come while we stand and sing?