

Be Faithful

Special Message

Revelation 2:8-11 & 3:7-13 10-10-2016

Summary: We are like Smyrna and Philadelphia – unimpressive churches by earthly standards, but Christ’s favorites because of their faithfulness to his Word. That shows our great value (this church is worth salvaging because we keep his Word), and our responsibility (we must continue to be faithful, and our hope (Christ is supreme, and nothing is over until he says it is over).

Introduction.....	2
About Us	2
Suffering	2
Legal Problems	2
Reputation.....	3
Weakness	3
Financial Problems.....	3
No Rebuke	3
Keeping God’s Word	4
Our Value	4
The Leadership Keeps His Word	5
The Congregation Keeps His Word	5
Commitment to a Body.....	6
Or is it worth preserving this one?.....	6
Name	6
Our Responsibility.....	7
#1. Don’t be Afraid (Be Courageous)	7
Satan’s Objective.....	7
#2. Be Faithful	7
Faithfulness in Holiness.....	8
Faithfulness in Ministry.....	8
Our Hope	9
Master of Life	9
Key Holder.....	10
Vindication.....	10
Conclusion	11
Application Questions (James 1:25)	11

Revelation 2:8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty-yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Revelation 3:7 "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: Thus saith the one who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 8 I know your deeds. See, I gave you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 10 Since you have

kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Introduction

Ten years and one week ago today we started a Bible study in our home. Within three months that Bible study became Agape Bible Church. Now, 500 some sermons later, here I am preaching my final sermon as the preaching pastor of this church. When I think back over that decade - all the times we've taken the Lord's Supper together, times of worship when everyone was aware that the Spirit was moving in a special way, all the baptisms and healed marriages and sins that have been confessed and forsaken, tens of thousands of dollars given to help the poor, missions work, children being taught, friendships built, battles fought. We've been through a lot together – especially the last 5 years. And *especially* the last 5 weeks. After all that, what does a shepherd say to the flock that he dearly loves in his final sermon? As I prayed about that, the answer that came was this – let the Chief Shepherd speak. Let our great Pastor in heaven speak to his church.

Open your Bibles please to the book of Revelation. In Rev.2 and3 the Lord Jesus Christ dictates letters to 7 churches that represent all churches of all time in various contexts. So all we have to do is look at which one of these churches we resemble and we can see what the Lord Jesus Christ is saying to us. The reason we have these letters is so that at whatever point we find ourselves in the same boat with one of these churches, we can look and see Jesus' specific instructions to churches that are in that particular situation. So which churches are we like? I think the two we are most like at this time are Smyrna and Philadelphia. Let's take a look at how they are described, and see if you agree.

About Us

So let's start by taking a look at the "about us" page on their website. Every church website has a page called "about us" where you can find out all about what that church is like. So let's click on that link and see how Jesus describes these 2 churches. What we find on that page is something that would never appear on any church website. When Jesus describes what church life is like in these two fellowships, all he describes is problems. If you were going around church shopping in Asia Minor in the first Century, most people would probably skip over Smyrna and Philadelphia. Both churches were in trouble. They were small, weak, and had all kinds of problems. And both churches had a terrible reputation in the community and were hated and despised by the people in their town.

Suffering

Revelation 2:9 I know your afflictions

The word **afflictions** literally means, "That which causes pain." The root idea is that of pressure. These churches were going through a painful ordeal that just kept clamping down on them tighter and tighter.

Legal Problems

Next he mentions their legal problems. In 2:10 it says the people at Smyrna were in trouble with the law and were facing prison. Smyrna was probably the most dangerous city for a Christian to live in.

Citizens were required to say, “Caesar is Lord” to affirm their patriotism, and if you failed to do that, the penalty was death. So they were facing major legal problems.

Reputation

Then he brings up their reputation: **I know the slander**. Both these churches were being slandered in the community. It was the same group that was persecuting both churches – hostile Jews. And they were saying, “We have God’s favor. But God is against you – that’s why you’re suffering. You don’t have his approval or his favor.” And they were turning the whole community in those cities against these churches by making false accusations and destroying their reputation.

Weakness

Another characteristic of the church in Philadelphia was weakness.

Revelation 3:7 I know that you have little strength

He says **little strength** instead of “you’re weak” because it’s not intended as a rebuke. He’s just acknowledging – these people were holding on by a thread. The church was weak. You usually don’t see that on the “about us” page – “We are small, very few members, very meager resources, and we are right at the breaking point.” Compared to churches like Sardis which had a reputation for really thriving and being alive, Smyrna and Philadelphia were not very impressive.

Financial Problems

They also had financial problems.

Revelation 2:9 I know your afflictions and your poverty

If you want a church that’s operating in the black, and has good financial stability, don’t bother visiting Smyrna. There were two different Greek words for poverty, the one here is the more extreme one. It refers to absolute destitution. This church was in major financial trouble.

No Rebuke

Neither one of these churches was going to make the cover of Christianity Today magazine. From a human standpoint, it would seem like these churches should just shut their doors. But our thoughts are not God’s thoughts. Jesus looked at Sardis, which was hopping with ministry activity and had a reputation for really being alive, and he said, “The reality is you’re dead” (3:1). Then he looked at Smyrna and Philadelphia, which looked like they were pretty much dead, and they ended up being his favorite two churches.

The format for each letter is essentially the same:

- Jesus introduces himself by highlighting one of his attributes that is especially relevant for that church.
- He says, “I know your deeds” and then goes on to praise them for what they are doing right.
- Then he says, “But I hold this against you” and rebukes them for what they are doing wrong and warns them about consequences.
- Then he closes by giving them various promises of rewards they will get if they persevere and become overcomers.

That’s the structure, but in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia the “but I hold this against you” section is missing. Those two problem-infested churches were so pleasing to Christ, he didn’t have anything negative to say – only praise.

Keeping God's Word

Why? Just because they were suffering? No. There's nothing especially virtuous about suffering. Some churches might be suffering just because they've made some dumb decisions, or they have unrepentant sin in the church and they are being punished by God. It wasn't because of their suffering that Jesus commends them. It was because of their response to the suffering.

Revelation 3:8 ...I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word.

That's what made these churches so thoroughly pleasing to the Lord Jesus Christ. What was their music like? Probably not spectacular. Did they have a good nursery program? Youth group? Singles ministry? Inviting atmosphere? Contemporary worship? A paved parking lot? We don't know – Jesus doesn't mention any of that. All we know is that they had lots of problems, and during all those problems they kept God's Word. That's the mark of a good church.

Our Value

We don't have time this morning to examine everything in these two letters, but in the time we have I'd like to just point out 3 things. If we really are like these 2 churches, that tells us something about our value, our responsibility, and our hope. Let's look at those one at a time. First, our value.

How valuable is a church that fits the description of Jesus' two favorite churches? And I say that, not just to bolster your self-esteem as a church, but because after today, you as a congregation have to decide what to do next. You have to decide if this church is worth salvaging. We've had so many hardships, and are facing so much difficulty, is it worth it to try to restart? Or should we just disband?

The other thing many of you will have to decide is if you do leave, where should you go next? If you do find yourself looking for a new church, what should you look for? Every church has strengths and weaknesses, but which ones are the things that really matter most to Jesus Christ? I think if you understand what made these two churches Jesus' favorites, you'll know what's really important to look for in a church.

There are a lot of things that are important, but Jesus boils it down for us in one word: faithfulness.

3:8 ... you have little strength, yet you have kept my word

10 you have kept my command to endure patiently

In the midst of all the suffering and pressure and problems, they persevered and remained faithful to the Word of God. And there are two aspects of faithfulness to the Word – preaching and doing. First, preaching. We talk a lot around here about the importance of expository preaching. Expository preaching is simply preaching where the main point of the passage ends up being the main point of the sermon. The purpose of the sermon is whatever the purpose of the passage is. The mood of the sermon comes from the mood of the passage. Instead of reading a verse and using that as a springboard to say whatever about that topic, the pastor spends the week learning what that passage is teaching, and that's what he presents in the sermon.

And it should be in depth. Scripture is not shallow and so preaching should not be shallow. If you don't get insights most weeks and learn things you didn't already know most weeks, you're going to be malnourished. God's Word is not shallow and so preaching should not be shallow. I think in-depth, expository preaching is the single most important factor to consider in a church. And sadly, it's difficult to find.

But even more difficult to find is what I call expository ministry. And this is the "doing" part. Expository ministry is when all of the systems and structures and decision-making in the church are driven as directly as possible from the words of Scripture. When the elders get together to make a decision, they look to God's Word for guidance. It's what we're doing right now in this sermon – we're faced with a decision, and so we ask, "What does the Bible say about this kind of a situation?" When we set up policies and procedures and systems, the goal is to put into practice principles from God's Word,

and achieve the purposes called for in God's Word. So you can point to anything we do in the church and say, "Why do we do this?... " and the leadership should be able to point to a passage in Scripture and say, "We do it to accomplish that."¹ That's expository ministry.

Or when problems come up, and we ask, "How should we handle this?" Many times there is one way to handle it that will keep everyone happy and not ruffle any feathers, but it's not what the Bible says to do. If we do what the Bible says to do, people will get upset. Following through on Mt.18, being proactive with peacemaking principles, holding the values of Scripture even when they conflict with the values of our culture – those things can be very unpopular, and I've seen one Bible-teaching church after another compromise on those things just to avoid rocking the boat of church growth. It's not easy to find a church with leaders who have the courage and integrity to keep God's Word in the way they conduct ministry no matter what the cost.

So if you leave this place after today and look for another church, that's one thing to look for. Look for a church that not only preaches, but also keeps God's Word. And for those wrestling with the question of whether to stay, and you're asking the question, "Is this body worth salvaging?" one factor to take into consideration is the fact that we have leaders here who are fully committed to expository ministry.

The Leadership Keeps His Word

You have men here who have the courage to keep God's Word no matter what. Would it be worth the trouble to preserve this body so that there is one more church in Denver that is committed to keeping God's Word? How hard is it to find a church with leaders who will follow God's Word even if it means losing face, looking dumb, being mocked, losing revenue, losing members, or getting criticism? In this church we have some. Mike is like that. So is Tom. So is Chuck and Andrew and Bill and Greg Thomas and Chris Reeves and Randy Squire and several others. Are all those men going to stay? I don't know. Maybe they will if you, as a church, plead with them to stay. Each of them needs to decide how God is leading them at this time. But even if some of them leave, or don't feel called to serve in official leadership at this time, there are much larger churches where you're doing well if you can find one or two men of that caliber in the leadership.

The Congregation Keeps His Word

And it's not just the leaders – it's the congregation. One of the most delightful things about pastoring this church is the fact that all I have to do is show you that God's Word says something, and you'll accept it. I can take the most unpopular principle in the whole Bible, and if I can simply convince you that the Bible teaches it, then that's all I have to do. For example, if I stand up here and point out that wives are to be submissive to their husbands, I don't have to go on and on with psychological studies about how it causes relationships to work more smoothly. I don't have to give a million examples of how women were submissive and it had some good result. I don't have to try to persuade you by delving in to all the aspects of your marriage that will be affected positively by that. All I have to do is show you that that is what the Bible says and you accept it! You are a church that keeps his Word. And being surrounded by a body of people who do that is a great blessing. It's a blessing many Christians around the world never get to enjoy. And it's a blessing that many Christians in Denver don't get to enjoy. But we have it here.

When I read the descriptions of Jesus' favorite two churches in Revelation, and then I look at this body, I think what we have here is something very special.

¹ An example of that is the prayer groups. Why do we have prayer groups in this church? It's not because one day the idea popped into someone's head and the elders said, "Yeah, that sounds like it would be popular." What happened was we studied what the New Testament says the church is supposed to do when we come together, we read about all the "one another" commands, and we asked, "What kind of a format would be conducive to fulfilling those one another commands?"

Commitment to a Body

I hope when you make your decision to stay or leave, you take into consideration not just the teaching, but also the body. Last week we did that survey, and most people just marked 1 or 2 options under which they would stay. “I’ll stay if it’s this or this, otherwise I’m leaving.” But there were a few who marked every single one “stay.” One of those was Greg and Martha Thomas. And I mention theirs because the comment on that survey really struck me. “We are committed to this body. If we lose the deep, expository preaching, we would still remain, but it would be more difficult.” That really struck me. There’s something to be said for an attitude that says, “This is my family. I’m committed to this body. I love these people, and I want to serve *them* with my gifts.

If you’ve been around a while you know there really is something special about this group. We’ve been in battle together. We’ve cried out to God in prayer together. We’ve received answers to those prayers together. We’ve celebrated baptisms together. We’ve watched people grow spiritually, and we’ve all pitched in together to make it happen. We opened up our wallets over the years and gave, we served in all kinds of ministries, we showed up for work days, we sat under the same preaching, we prayed for one another in prayer groups, we visited one another in hospital rooms and jail cells, we’ve helped one another out in hard financial times, we suffered together and we’ve rejoiced together. We’ve rebuked one another and exhorted one another and encouraged one another and instructed one another and prayed for one another.

If God is calling you somewhere else, and you’re sure of that, then you need to follow that calling, but if that’s the case, your leaving should be a painful tearing away from a family, not just a switch from one church to another like changing your insurance provider or something.

Jesus evaluates a church, not by its size, and not by its popularity, not by its activity – but by its faithfulness to keep his Word. And what is the summary of his Word? Love the Lord your God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. This church is devoted, above all, to loving God. Looking up. Focusing on the attributes of God – what he is like. We do that in our songs – starting our praise time with a focus on some attribute of God, and then building so our final song is completely focused on what God is like. We do that in our prayers, in our counseling, in our children’s ministry, youth ministry – always beginning with attributes of God. Are there so many other churches in this area that do that, that it’s not really necessary for this one to continue?

Or is it worth preserving this one?

Name

And when I talk about salvaging “this church,” I’m not saying it would have to have the name Agape. The name isn’t the issue. The only purpose of a name is to communicate something about the church to outsiders. So if our current name is no longer communicating what we want it to communicate, we drop it and get a new name. There’s nothing wrong with that. The idea of a new name is a very biblical concept. Abraham, Jacob, Peter, Paul, James and John were all given new names.² Revelation 2:17 promises that we will all receive a new name some day. Eight times God promises that he will someday give the Nation of Israel a new name.³ And one of the promises Jesus makes to Philadelphia is that if they are faithful, Jesus will someday reveal to them his new name.

3:12 Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. ... I will write on him the name of my God ... and I will also write on him my new name.

If it were up to me I’d go take that Agape sign down right now. And to go forward there might need to be some other changes as well – shoring up some areas of weakness so we can learn from past mistakes

² Gn.17:5, 32:27, Jn.1:42, Acts 13:9, Mk.3:17.

³ Isaiah 1:26; 60:14; 65:15; Jeremiah 3:17; 23:6; 33:16; Ezekiel 48:35; Zechariah 8:3.

and build on a more solid foundation this time around. It's a good opportunity to make some needed changes, but what makes this church this church isn't the name of the external trappings; it's *you*.

And if you think this body can't survive without Darrell Ferguson, remind yourself who it is who walks among the lampstands of the churches and keeps the lights burning or snuffs them out. It's Jesus Christ, not Darrell Ferguson. Everyone is replaceable. Moses was replaceable. He might have been the greatest leader in human history, and yet he was replaced by Joshua and the nation of Israel did just fine. I'm convinced that for now, the best chance of survival for this church is for me to be gone for a while. But if I'm right, and you really are a lot like Smyrna and Philadelphia, that means this body is priceless in God's sight and is one of his favorites.

Our Responsibility

So that's our value – what about our responsibility? Jesus gives Smyrna two commands. See if you can pick them out as I read.

2:10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

#1. Don't be Afraid (Be Courageous)

The first command is **Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer**. Courage. Don't be afraid of suffering. Fear of suffering is one of the most powerful tools Satan has. If he can get us to orient our lives around avoiding suffering, he's got us in the palm of his hand.

Satan's Objective

And Jesus helps us here by showing us what Satan's goal is.

2:10 I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you

It was human beings who were persecuting them, but the one orchestrating all that was Satan himself. When people lie about us, slander us, disparage us on the news or in blogs or on Facebook – the issue isn't those people. It doesn't matter what those people's motives are. What matters is what Satan's motives are, which is to get us to sin.

The word for **test** in v.10 can mean either "test" or "tempt," and whenever Satan is the one doing it, it's a temptation. He doesn't just make us suffer for the sake of making us suffer. Satan isn't satisfied just by seeing tears of anguish run down your face. He wants more than that. He wants that anguish to drive you to sin. The reason Satan brings suffering into a church is to cause us to respond in sinful ways – that's his objective. If someone falls into sin and repents, that doesn't ruin the church. So Satan tries to get us to respond to other people's sin by committing more sin – and to justify it rather than repent of it. Satan knows that he doesn't have enough power to destroy a church. And so the only way he can bring destruction on a church is by tempting the church to destroy itself by justifying sin.

So Jesus said to this church, "Don't be afraid of suffering. Be afraid of sinning."

#2. Be Faithful

That's the first command. The second command has to do with faithfulness.

Be faithful, even to the point of death

They have been faithful so far, and Jesus tells them, "Keep that up." "How long?" Not long – just until you're dead. If you hang in there for a while, and then collapse, that's not good enough. We need to persevere all the way to the end – that's why Scripture has so much to say about the value of

perseverance. James 1:2 says we should consider in pure joy when we suffer because we get perseverance out of the deal.

Romans 5:3 ...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance

In the midst of relentless suffering some people have said, “But how much perseverance do I need? I can’t stand to learn any more perseverance!” Those are the words of someone who needs to learn perseverance. Satan knows from experience that it’s after a long battle, at the point of extreme fatigue that Christians can often become easy pickings.

That’s true for individuals and for churches. When I look back over all that God has done in this place over the last decade, there is no question in my mind that Satan wants this place shut down. Whatever it takes, he wants to put an end to the things that go on here week after week. He wants the praises to be silenced, he wants the fellowship to die, he wants the ministry of the Word to be muzzled. That’s what he is after, and that’s what he will get if he can keep us from persevering. And so he hammers away, trying to break down our resolve.

Faithfulness in Holiness

And Jesus calls us to be remain faithful. What does that look like? I think there are two parts to faithfulness. One is to be faithful to the path of holiness – refusing to give in to temptation. When the pressure comes, instead of responding in the flesh and sinning against each other in our speech or attitudes, we remain faithful to what God’s Word tells us about love for one another and humility and respect and gentle speech and kindness and selflessness and considering others more important than yourself. Don’t give into sin, even when things get really hard – that’s faithfulness to God’s Word.

Faithfulness in Ministry

The other aspect of faithfulness is to follow through on what God has called us to do no matter what kind of opposition arises. If God gives you a task, you need to do it. Last week at our meeting a whole bunch of you exhorted me to keep using my gift. Many of you have written me or called me and urged me, “Whatever you do, make sure you keep serving the church with your gift. Even if it brings hardship into your life, even if it causes trouble – keep using your gift.” And many of you have said the same thing to Mike. Several of you have urged Mike to quit his job, give up a secure income, and take on all the heartaches and headaches and difficulties and risks of being the preaching pastor of a church plant. You’re asking a lot, which is perfectly fine because nothing in the world is more important than the work of the gospel. It’s worth risking everything for – like Epaphroditus, who risked his life for the work. But here’s my question for you: when you call on us to be faithful to our calling, are you willing to be as faithful as you want us to be? Are you willing to subject yourself to hardship and risk and sacrifice and difficulty and scorn if need be in order to faithfully discharge the duties of your calling in the church? Are you willing to pay any price to serve with your gift? Is that something you just want other people to do for your benefit, or are you willing to do it?

Right now Mike is praying fervently, asking God if this is the way God wants him to go. How is Mike going to know what God’s answer is? I think one of the main ways God answers a prayer like that is through the church. Paul and Barnabas knew God was sending them on a mission trip when the Spirit revealed that to the congregation. The Seven knew they were called to the deaconing ministry when the church body put them forward. And one way a pastor will know he’s being called to shepherd this flock is if the flock says, “If you’ll commit; we’ll commit.” If there were 30 or 40 of you who would sign on the dotted line and say, “I’m all in. I’m fully committed to this restart effort. I will serve on a ministry team, use my gifts, pray hard, give 10% of my income, and do all I can do to make this effort a success so that there will be a church in this area that looks up, goes deep, and reaches out.” If 30 or 40 people committed to that, and 8 or 10 men stepped up and said, “I will help lead this church,” that would say a

lot about whether this is the way God is leading. But if he just gets a dozen people who say, “Well, I’ll sit and watch and see what happens,” and that’s all he has to work with, that may be the Spirit saying, “This isn’t the way I’m leading right now.”

Now, please understand – I’m not telling you that it’s God’s will for you to make that kind of commitment to this body. I don’t know if that’s God’s will for you or not, so I would never tell you that you should do that. But I am telling you – I’m commanding you on the authority of the Word of God, you must make that commitment to *some* church. Whether or not it’s this church is a decision you need to make between you and God as you seek his guidance and decide whether this church is worth salvaging. But whether it’s here or somewhere else, it’s not optional. God has given you gifts and requires you to prove faithful.

1 Corinthians 4:2 Now it is required that stewards must prove faithful.

The enemy will tempt some of you to just withdraw. “That experience at Agape was so traumatic, I need to just sit out of church for a while and recover. I need to just attend a church somewhere as an observer so I can heal.” You don’t recover or heal by disobeying God or by being unfaithful to your calling. Disobedience and unfaithfulness never brings healing – it only causes further damage to your soul. If we learn anything from the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, it’s that Jesus loves a body of believers who remain faithful even through the most excruciating suffering. You can’t say, “There was suffering, therefore I don’t have to be faithful right now.” Times of suffering are precisely the times when faithfulness is most necessary. In Rev.2:3 he praises Ephesus because they have not grown weary. Don’t grow weary and falter in your calling.

Matthew 24:45 Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put over the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46 It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.

In the weeks to come, don’t be found idle. Either be faithful here or be faithful somewhere else, but whatever you do, don’t use what has happened here as an excuse for unfaithfulness. We are all familiar with that phrase, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Where does that phrase come from? It comes from the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. A talent was a large sum of money – about 16 years’ wages. Well over a half million dollars. Jesus tells a story about a master who gives 1 talent to one servant, 5 talents to another, and 10 to another to manage while he’s gone. The ones who got 5 and 10 put the money to work and got a good return, and the master came back and said, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The guy with the one talent was afraid to risk investing it, so he just locked it up and kept it safe until the master returned. And the master’s response to him was “You wicked, lazy servant.” Three servants, and the master returns and points to each one and says, “Faithful ... Faithful ... Lazy.” And the point of the parable is, don’t let that happen to you. God has entrusted resources to your care – your spiritual gifts, your skills and abilities, your body, your money – you have all these resources that you have been given for the sake of your master’s estate. Faithfulness is using your gifts, talents, abilities, time, and money to serve the church. Unfaithfulness is failing to use your gifts, talents, abilities, time, and money to serve the church.

Our Hope

Master of Life

So, on the question of value – what makes a church good or bad? Faithfulness to the Word. And faithfulness to the work. On the question of responsibility – Jesus commands us to continue to be faithful until death. One final point – our hope. Each letter begins with Jesus introducing himself by pointing to 1 or 2 of his attributes. For each different church, there are certain attributes of Christ that are necessary for that church to focus on in order for them to do what Christ wants them to do. So there are certain attributes that will really help a church like Ephesus, and there are other attributes that, if you’re like the

church in Pergamum, focusing on those attributes will really help you. So if we are like Smyrna and Philadelphia, and our context is a lot like their context, what attribute of Christ is most essential for us, at this time, to fix our attention on?

2:8 To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Jesus is the conqueror of death and the master of life. The people in Smyrna were at risk of being put to death by the government. And their church itself seemed to be on life support. And Jesus assures them, “I am the one who decides who lives or dies.” That’s true of individuals, and it’s true of churches. Jesus decides if the church lives or dies – not Fox 31 news. Not Darrell Ferguson. Not someone with a blog or Facebook page or website or a gossipy mouth. Those people are not in control of what happens to Christ’s church; Christ is. And if you read the accounts of Jesus going to a funeral and breaking it up by raising the person from the dead, you realize – nothings over until Jesus says it’s over. If we’re going to obey the commands that Christ is about to give to these churches, we have to be clear in our thinking – Christ is the author of life, no one else, and nothing is over until Jesus says it’s over.

Key Holder

That’s the attribute for the people in Smyrna. What about the people in Philadelphia?

3:7 To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: Thus saith the one who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 8 I know your deeds. See, I gave you an open door that no one can shut.

That is a quotation from Isaiah 22:22, where Eliakim is given total authority within the house of David.

Isaiah 22:22 I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

Eliakim had total authority in the house of David; Jesus has total authority in the kingdom of God. He decides if a door of opportunity is open or closed. He decides if an effort is successful or a failure. He’s the one that can grant access to the treasury of blessings and grace, and he’s the one who can close the door to that access. And look what he says to this church:

3:8 ... See, I gave you an open door that no one can shut.

Jesus wants this church to remember that a door isn’t closed until Jesus closes it. Everything they could observe around them was screaming the fact that the doors of opportunity were all closed, and Jesus is saying, “No, I say the door is open, and if I say it’s open, no one can close it.”

Both of those point to Christ’s absolute supremacy. And we need to keep that in mind so that we can have confidence in his great and precious promises. We don’t have time this morning to get into all the many promises he makes to these two churches, but I will mention one of them.

Vindication

3:9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan ... acknowledge that I loved you.

There were people publicly slandering the church in Philadelphia, and those people had a much broader platform than the people in the church. People in the community were hearing the slander and believing it, and the folks in the church didn’t have any way of setting the record straight. That’s frustrating, but look at Jesus’ promise. He says, “I’m going to make those people acknowledge that I loved you.” Jesus is going to make the truth known. He will expose who was in the wrong and who was in the right and he will force those who were in the wrong to acknowledge the truth. We don’t have to worry and fret and stew about lies being told about us, slanted reporting, attacks online, blogs – Jesus

Christ says, “I know the truth, and when the time is right, I’m going to make that truth known, and I’m going to make your enemies acknowledge it.” Christ always has the last word, because he is the author of life and the controller of the key.

Conclusion

When Jesus called the disciples, he did it in a very dramatic way. These professional, commercial fishermen put out their nets all night and didn’t catch a single fish, which was a miracle. The Sea of Galilee is so loaded with fish, to put out those huge nets all night and not get a single one is a supernatural act. Then Jesus told them to put the nets out one more time. They did it just to humor Jesus, and they caught so many that the nets started to rip and the boats started to sink. Jesus did that miracle and then said, “Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men.” Keep going with your career and you’ll have total failure. Follow me and I’ll give you spiritual fruit beyond what you can even handle. So, they left their nets, left their families and followed him – until Jesus died. When that happened, they were devastated. They were crushed and traumatized, and they all just went back to their old jobs.

Then comes Jn.21. Jesus rises from the dead, and pays those men a visit. Again, they catch nothing. Jesus tells them to put the net on the other side of the boat and they catch so many that their equipment can’t handle it. The exact same miracle he did when he called them the first time.

What was Jesus’ point? His point was very clear. He was saying, “Men, when I called you a couple years ago, I didn’t mean temporarily. I wasn’t calling you to a short term mission. I told you, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. I told you that once, now I’m telling you again: *follow me!* Don’t get discouraged or disillusioned and bail out of ministry. Remain faithful until you’re dead. And if you do, I promise, I will give you spiritual fruit that will be beyond what your equipment can even handle.”

Benediction 1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) What is the biggest hindrance or threat to your faithfulness? (Fear of suffering, laziness, ignorance, peer or family pressure, etc.)
- 2) What are your spiritual gifts and your primary calling in the church?