

Jesus' Vision for the Church

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Last week we looked at Revelation 1, where we discovered apocalypse means to unveil, a revealing of the heavenly Christ and God's plan for the world. I hope you were moved by that vision of *Christ*. This week, we turn our attention to the seven lampstands or churches, where Christ reveals *his vision for us*. His words will disturb and thrill, each message marked by three elements: *reproof, repentance, reward*. Our temptation will be to listen for what does *not* apply to us, but can I ask you to remember this is *the faithful witness* speaking? Each letter framed by "the words" of Jesus and *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. Let's resolve to hear, to pay attention to *his words* more than a personal letter. Jesus is inviting us to embrace his vision of the church so *our lamp burns more brightly*. We'll look at four of seven.

Loveless Ephesus

John writes: *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*. Some set up. *First*, why does he write to *angels*? Well, it's in keeping with the apocalyptic genre: Jesus through an angel to the lampstands, but we'll also see pillars, stones, white robes. What does all this imagery suggest? Jesus

walking among the golden lampstands tending to its features? It suggests a temple. *The ascended Christ has chosen the church as his dwelling place*, the palace of his presence. So no matter how messy it gets, the church is not too messy for Jesus, nor should it be for you.

The heavenly Christ is not too lofty for lowly people. *Second*, the messages are specific enough to speak to *historical* issues but representative enough to apply throughout the ages. Which is why he says hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Which words to them apply to us? We must rely on the Holy Spirit to discern that. Now, what does he discover about Ephesus? *I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil...But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.* Ephesus didn't have it easy.

They lived in a pagan city immersed in idolatry, frequently exposed to false apostles, people claiming to speak the truth while peddling lies. This church didn't "bear" with those who are evil. The word means tolerate. They didn't tolerate deceptive teachers. But often there's a weakness behind every strength. Jesus' **reproof**: *while strong on doctrine, you are weak on affection.* You prize theology over piety. Think themselves theological enlightened, troll those weaker in doctrine, mock prosperity preachers, and liberal ideas. They love apologetics but do they love the Lord? They bear up for his name but abandon his love. Jesus isn't calling out a moral

misstep. He's correcting a cold heart. Is your heart cool to Christ? Are you more fascinated with beliefs about Christ than the person of Christ? Sociology, theology, politics, philosophy. Do you languish in affection for Jesus but get amped about football, bands, food, or home décor? Jesus says to you, **Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.** Remember and **repent**. Remember when you couldn't put the Bible down, when you used to linger in prayer, when couldn't get enough of Jesus? *Remember and repent.* Repent means to turn around. It's not just agreeing your sin, or confessing your sin; it's turning away from your sin to trust in Jesus. Why should we conquer it? **Reward: To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.** Because of the *tree of life*. It's an allusion to the garden of Eden, where there was a tree of life *and* a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But in the new Eden, the paradise *of God*, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is conspicuously absent. *There is only the tree of life*, vitality, joy, with no possibility of falling again. But if you don't conquer, you'll be doomed to biting into the mushy, worm-filled fruit of eternal death. But those who conquer will sink their teeth into the satisfying fruit of life with Christ, forever, where doctrine and affection hum in harmony.

Suffering Smyrna

Now the church in Smyrna is an exception to the *reproof-rebuke-reward* message. Jesus says, '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. Jesus walks among the churches; he sees their suffering, even acknowledges types: *tribulation*, often physical; *poverty*, economic; *slander*, emotional deliberate, demeaning misrepresentation. Can you identify with one of these? Jesus says to you, *I know*. He knows your sufferings, not just objectively but *compassionately*, intimately. I know your tribulation. Grieve with him. All of this suffering was probably the result of the **synagogue of Satan**. What's that? Well, Smyrna was known for its passionate support of Roman imperial cult, home to multiple temples in honor of Roman religion.

Apparently there was a group of Jews who reported Christians to Rome for their refusal to worship Caesar. They often slandered them saying their allegiance to Jesus was a threat to Rome. Some synagogues even pronounced curses on Christians. This put them at an economic disadvantage because consumers wouldn't buy their good in the market. I'm reminded of an entrepreneur I met in Malaysia. He started a suite of restaurants called Hangry. His goal was to beat out the two biggest chains in Malaysia: McDonalds and Burger King. Hangry is now #3. But after considerable success he grew convicted that while he and his investors were succeeding his

employees were not. After considering what impact the gospel should have on his work, he decided to make loving his employees his bottom line not profit, even if his investors fire him. What's your bottom line in the workplace? Are you willing to experience loss for faithfulness to Jesus? Or do you manage your reputation to avoid financial threat? I think of the woman in our city group who, at risk of her job, challenged her company's intolerant requirement that everyone support a pro-choice platform. Jesus praises Christians like her, like the suffering Smyrnans. He says they are *rich* in faith. He issues no reproof, calls for no repentance, but warns of *more* suffering: *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.* Although God allows the devil to throw some into prison, he places limits on their testing, ten days, an allusion to Daniel's ten day test for refusal to worship gods of Babylon. There is no way to soften this. Some will suffer death for their faithfulness to Jesus—all will be tested—which forces us to ask ourselves: Is he worth it? Is he? Consider his **reward**: be faithful and I will give you *the crown of life*. A striking reward because crowns belong on kings (or queens) not commoners. Jesus wears a crown when riding a white horse to depose his enemies (6:2;14:14). A crown is placed on *our heads*, a sign of our participation in Jesus

victory over sin, death, and Satan. We need not fear because the faithful will enjoy his fruits of victory forever.

Permissive Pergamum

Pergamum was almost a complete mess, dwelling where Satan's throne is, a reference to the city as a capitol for Caesar worship.

Reproof: they embraced the teaching of Balaam who took a bribe to curse Israel, ate things dedicated to false gods, and participated in sexual immorality. *While they held fast to his name, they abandoned him in character.* Are you bribed by influence to keep your mouth shut about Jesus? Do you consume media that's an offering to idols? Films that praise immorality? Are you viewing porn, gawking at the other sex, entertaining fantasies? Jesus says, **Repent or I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.** Turn around or be judged by sword, the truth of his mouth. The truth judges with one edge and saves with another. As one philosopher said, When you uninstall truth it's like a computer uninstalling its own antivirus. Without it you're vulnerable to shut down. But when the truth is installed, operating, we enjoy a greater **reward:** *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.* The hidden manna is likely an allusion the culinary delights of the endtime wedding feast. The white stone is in place of a black stone,

indicating freedom from guilt, our pass into the grand feast, and our new name a permanent sign we belong in God's new creation. A heap of rewards! Don't give toss them aside for fleeting sex, money influence! Conquer your temptations with the promise of *the greater banquet*.

Lukewarm Laodicea

We conclude with Laodicea. [The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation](#) says: "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot...So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." **Reproof:**

Lukewarm faith isn't a happy medium between passionate and dispassionate, zealous and self-respecting; it is a repulsive state to the Lord Jesus which makes him want to vomit us out of his mouth. I fear this is the strongest indictment of American Christianity. Let me go to church often enough to feel I've done my duty *but not live a life of worship*, dip into community enough to feel Christian *but not submit my entire life to the Faithful and True*; know enough Bible to feel spiritual *without allowing the Amen to have the final word on my decisions*; get around Christianity enough to feel inspired *but not passionately join Jesus in the launch of his new beginning*. No, Jesus says. I spit (the word is vomit) that out of my mouth! Is your faith lukewarm? **Repent:** If this is remotely true of you, *now* is the time

for zeal: **be zealous and repent!** Turn around and take in Christ. 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. Christ is knocking. Do you hear him? Do not refuse him. Open the door of your heart. Welcome him in. Ask him to restore your first love, strengthen you in suffering, bolster your character, and heat up your faith! This heart's desire to feast with you. He has laid the table with a mountain of marvelous morsels. **Reward.** The one who conquers will sit with him, dine with him, rule with him, and live with him, *forever*. Church, do not eschew these eschatological rewards. Clothed with Christ, feasting with Christ, crowned by Christ, sitting with Christ, ruling with Christ in his new creation. Nothing beats this. Nothing. Ever.