

Many of you know, some of you might not, but I grew up in the church. My father was a minister. My earliest memories are of folding bulletins, filling communion trays, watching my dad prep sermons, etc. And contrary to popular notions of preacher's kids, I can stand here before you today and say: I love the church. Truly!

- **The church was where my friends were.** I remember how my friends and I would rush outside after Sunday morning or evening service to play two-hand touch football in the parking lot.
- **The church was where people loved me.** I remember struggling with some of my math classes and a guy in our church who lived 40 – 50 minutes away would drive to the church after a long day of work, just to tutor me in geometry.
- **The church was where I received forgiveness.** I remember when I was a kid, we were often out in the parking lot throwing rocks as far as we could, and one time I misjudged my throw such that *SMACK* it hit the side of a nice lady's car, for which she immediately extended forgiveness. Gotta love that!

So, yes, I love the church. But I'm also aware that the Church can sometimes seem unlovable. We've all heard the news stories of some sort of brokenness in the church.

Sometimes people lament the abuse of power, the accumulation of wealth, the moral hypocrisy, the getting in bed with politics; the list goes on and on. Other times, I hear people lament churches that compromise on moral issues, dilute doctrine, profane the sacred—that list goes on and on too (ALL of which are valid!).

When all this kind of stuff comes up, one of two things happens: (1) people dismiss the church, or (2) people dismiss the problems.

Now, I don't know your thoughts about church. I'm assuming that most of you are pro-church. But whether you are or you're not, I want to invite you to consider Jesus' perspective on the church. In fact, this is the question we'll be answering today: *What is Jesus' perspective on the Church?*

Our text for today is Revelation 2, and in it we see a series of direct messages to seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Today, we're covering the first of these three letters, looking at Jesus' words to THEM *then* to discover Jesus' words to US *now*. The best way to go through the content of these messages and to answer our question will be to highlight two things from each of these letters. But first, let's look at some context.

I love how each letter begins. It doesn't begin with the church itself. It begins with Jesus.

- To Ephesus, in Revelation 2:1, "Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." Intimate familiarity / presence / immanence.
- To Smyrna, in Revelation 2:8, "These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." Vindicated. Eternality. From whom all things come, for whom all things are.
- To Pergamum, in Revelation 2:12, "These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword." A sword? A sword. One that is the gospel of the kingdom of God that cuts to the heart.

After he articulates these letters are *from*, we see that Jesus has intimate familiarity with the people he is writing *to*. [See the online sermon to see a map of the cities.]

- **Ephesus** was one of the chief urban centers of Asia Minor and was located along the coast. It was a wealthy city lined with paved streets, columns, and more. Ephesus had athletic festivals that were held in its stadium and theater events where as many as 24,000 people could and would come to watch. Ephesus had a temple to the fertility goddess Artemis, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, attracting a steady stream of worshippers. Ephesus also had a temple dedicated to the goddess Roma as well as to Julius Caesar (and later towards the end of the first century one to Emperor Domitian as well).
- **Smyrna** was elegant and prosperous. The city was close to a harbor that brought commerce to the region. Careful urban planning undergirded the space. Streets were laid out in straight lines, paved with stone, and bordered by porticoes. And, significantly, the city had temples to the Roman emperors Augustus and Tiberias. As a cultural center, it had a good library and a shrine to the poet Homer.
- **Pergamum** was in many ways similar to Ephesus and Smyrna. The city contained a theater carved out of the side of the Acropolis, a temple dedicated to the Roman emperor Trajan, a Great Altar to Zeus, an ancient healing center for Asclepius, and also the Temple of Serapis.

Are you noticing anything? Wealthy society, idols, political seduction, pluralism. Different people, different gods, different lifestyles. All this was confronting the early Christians. All this made it difficult to follow Jesus. And we see this is the case.

- To the Christians in Ephesus, Jesus acknowledges that they're bearing with those who are evil (2:2), dealing with false apostles (2:2), and enduring patiently x2 (2:2, 3).
- To the Christians in Smyrna, Jesus acknowledges that they are in "tribulation" (2:9), in "poverty" (2:9), being slandered (2:9), and about to suffer and be thrown into prison (2:10).
- To the Christians in Pergamum, Jesus acknowledges that one of their brethren, Antipas, was killed (2:13) and that they're dealing with where Satan's throne is (2:13).

That's who the recipients are of Jesus' words. These Christians are struggling; they're people with their backs up against the wall, people being lured by the world around them. So, what is his perspective on *them*? And what can we learn about his perspective on *us*? Two things.

1. SOLIDARITY

You know that Facebook thing people will put over their profile pictures to demonstrate solidarity with people or causes? "I STAND WITH _____." (For example, "I stand with Ukraine!" or "I stand with Israel!" or "I stand with Ben Affleck after Jennifer Lo filed for divorce!" Definitely not me. But some of you do I'm sure!)

That's kind of like what Jesus is doing here, only more actionable and close to the hurt and pain and hardship on the ground.

Whether we like it or not, Jesus begins each message to these churches with a kind of encouragement and solidarity. Take a look.

- To Ephesus, Jesus says, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name,

and have not grown weary... You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (2:2,3,6).

- To Smyrna, Jesus gives encouragement, saying, "I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 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" (2:9,10).
- To Pergamum, Jesus says, "I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city" (2:13).

What I love about this is that it shows us that even amid all their hardship and shortcomings, Jesus' *perspective* on the Church is: **"I stand with Ephesus. I stand with Smyrna. I stand with Pergamum."** Wouldn't that be encouraging for them?

Is that not encouraging for us? It's so easy to think that because our failures are so close to us that Jesus might want to give up on us. But here's what I want to encourage you with: Despite your hardship or shortcomings, Christian, Jesus is here, he is close. He knows. And he's committed to your flourishing. Despite whatever it is, Jesus is saying "I stand with my church!"

I know of a couple in this church (this is used with permission!) who have a great relationship. They love each other A LOT. But, like any couple, they also have disagreements. Like any couple, their sin "leaks" out on each other sometimes and that needs to be talked about between them. I like what this couple does though in both kinds of times.

When they're going strong, out on a date night, one of them will sometimes say, "Same team" and give a hug. But also, when they're in a disagreement, and when it feels like they're *against* each other, what they do is one person will remind them both, "Same team," and they'll hug.

Friends, this is what Jesus offers to us, to his church. He's saying to all of us, "Same team!"

And you know how I know this? Paul gives the reason in Ephesians 5:25-27. He writes that it's because "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

2. SCRUTINY

What's Jesus' perspective on his church? SOLIDARITY. But you know what? It's *that* reality (the fact that he stands WITH his church and died for her and is committed to her) that leads us to point 2—Jesus' perspective is not only SOLIDARITY, but also SCRUTINY.

That's not a "fun" word, I realize that. It rubs us, it agitates us. But I chose this word intentionally to convey something I think is missing and that is important to remember about Jesus.

I remember not too long ago attending a Christian conference and in one of the break-out sessions we were supposed to sit and listen prayerfully for kind words from Jesus to enter our minds. It was a kind of meditative thing. And that is all well and good. But at that conference, there was a caveat to the whole experience. The rule given before we started was (and I'm paraphrasing) was this: this: As you "listen," if anything negative or non-affirming comes to mind, then it's not from Jesus. If it's positive or affirming, then it's from Jesus. If not, it's not from him (meaning you can toss it out). And I thought to myself, "I don't think that's *quite* right."

Brennan Manning in *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, talks about how in our culture, “We want to domesticate the Lion of Judah, to make Him our tame lion who does tricks on our terms. But He is wild, not to be tamed by our expectations or confined by our limited understanding.”

Here’s a question for you: *Have you domesticated the Lion of Judah??* Whether we have done that to him in our minds or not, Jesus cannot be tamed. Look at how he speaks to these churches:

- To Ephesus, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (2:4-5).
- To Smyrna, “Be faithful, even to the point of death” (2:10). Actually, I guess they’re good!
- And to Pergamum, “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (2:14-16).

You hear what Jesus is saying here? He is calling out these people! He says, “You have forsaken your first love! You need to repent! I will remove your lampstand! Be faithful even unto death! I will fight against you with the sword of my mouth!” What?

Listen: I don’t know your thoughts about church. I’m assuming that most of you are pro-church. But if you’re not, or if perhaps you’re teetering that line of “Man, I’m seeing all these wrong things happening within the church and I don’t think I can be a part of something like that. I still like Jesus, but organized religion ain’t it,” let me speak to you: As much as you may not like parts of the church, I can guarantee you, that, if it’s wrong and sinful, Jesus hates it more than you.

For those of us in the church, we cannot allow this diluted perception of Jesus—one that only captures his mercy, kindness, forgiveness—to delude us from the calling of Jesus on our lives to repent of sin and live for good.

I was deeply affected not too long ago in our prayer room that we started during our Revival series. In the room, there’s a place for prayer requests, there’s soft seating to do your own thing, there’s a place to write encouraging notes for others, but then there’s a confessional station where people write down anything they’d like to repent of.

As I read through the things our people wrote down and confessed, my heart was moved to sadness to see all the many different sin struggles people were wrestling through (as well as with my own)! Here’s a sampling:

- Lack of forgiveness for a family member
- Self-reliance, choosing comfort over obedience, fear of man/comparison, pride and self-righteousness, lack of trust and faith
- Anger, selfish ego, pride, lust, language, idols, putting things before God
- My short fuse with my children and my family
- Lack of patience with my husband

That same morning I was there, I wrote in my journal things I needed to confess: jealousy, envy, greed, pride, anger, self-righteousness, comparison, and a lack of contentment.

Friends, I cannot help but think this is the way. To see the places where we've messed up, personally or institutionally, and to say, "Father, forgive us. Help us." This is Christ's perspective on us—there are things we need to turn from with the Holy Spirit's help.

This is happening in our church, in our life groups. And it needs to continue. Let us never get to the place where we think there are never any weeds in our own backyards! Let us always heed the voice of the Spirit of Him who cries out to the churches, "Repent!"

CONCLUSION

So, what is Jesus' perspective? It's one of **solidarity** (He loves his Church! He loves you!), but it's also one of **scrutiny** (there is something more that he is calling us to!). And you know why he can do this? Because of the cross. On the cross, Jesus is shown to be Savior and Lord. As Savior, Jesus has demonstrated his willingness to stand with us. But as Lord, Jesus has the right to scrutinize us.

The cross shows us that Jesus has stood in solidarity with us—incarnation, atonement, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But the cross also shows us that, of anyone, Jesus has the right to provide a little constructive scrutiny—he is our Lord, our Master, our Head, and Our Judge.

Before we end, I want to show you this recap video from the Olympics. Take a look:
<https://x.com/Olympics/status/1823524999157649744>

You know what I love about that video? What I love is the sense of triumph, the sense of victory! In it you see arms raised, big smiles, cheers, great feats of accomplishment.

Before each letter ends, Jesus offers to reward those who remain faithful to him and his way.

- To Ephesus, Jesus says, "To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7).
- To Smyrna, Jesus says, "I will give you life as your victor's crown," and "The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death" (2:10,11).
- To Pergamum, Jesus says, "To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it" (2:17).

That same reward to them *then* is the same reward for us, you, *now*. Maybe you're struggling to be faithful, maybe repentance doesn't seem doable, maybe the stronghold feels too great, maybe despair seems too wide, maybe your sickness is too debilitating. Jesus is saying to you DON'T GIVE UP. DON'T GIVE IN. HOLD FAST. HOLD FAST and I will crown you, I will give you eternal life, I will fill your weary soul, I'll give you a stone with your name written on it, I'll keep you from the second death.