

Is Your Church Essential? Pt 2

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By Jess Arnds

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Providence Church
2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

We're going to open up to the book of Revelation again and let's pray as we get into it. I've got a lot to give you today and what we need is for the Spirit of God to really impress his word upon all of us and then to give us clarity and attention. So let's do that right now.

Father, we come to You, Maker of heaven and earth, the Ruler of all of history, and we know, Lord, that You are here among us, You are working through Your word and by Your Spirit in the hearts of Your people and so, Lord, I pray that You would do what only You can do and that is to cause the ears to hear and the heart to respond, that by the eyes of faith Your people would believe and be moved by Your word to glorify Your Son and to walk in a manner worthy of the calling that You've called us to. So Lord, I pray that You would give grace today, give grace to me that by Your Spirit, Lord, that I would convey this with all that it is worth as is humanly possible, and that in my weakness, Lord, that Your Spirit would overcome my deficiencies and the deficiencies of the hearers, Lord, and do a supernatural work to transform us closer into the image of Christ individually and as a body. So Lord, we ask for You to do this and we believe that You can and desire to do this and so we expect great things from You, Lord. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, today we continue to answer this question: is your church essential? Is your church absolutely necessary and is it extremely important, fundamental and central to your life? Is it essential to you? Do you consider it that important? And if so, how has your life demonstrated that in the past year and beyond? Think of this, in the past year we've had many excuses and reasons to neglect the body of Christ. Have you taken the out? Though we've had to socially distance ourselves in certain ways and there might be good reasons for that, who knows, there's been good reasons for that, you have had to socially be distant but have you recognized the need of the fellowship of the body and the word of God and the ministry that we have to do with one another is essential? What have your decisions done in the past year because you do what you want to do. Many people serve and give a semblance of service to God but when you have an excuse to not do it, you have a good reason to not do it, you will jump on that like a sale on Black Friday, and you will demonstrate that you never wanted to do it in the first place. What is essential to your life, has it been the church of the Lord Jesus Christ? If you believe it is essential and you believe that it matters that much, have you answered the question why, why is it so

essential? Is it simply a matter of mental health? Is it just good for you emotionally? Is it just because you like being here and you feel depressed when you're not? Is that what makes it essential? Is it just because it's good for you?

Well, as we began to look at this question last week, we focused on this fact, that the Lord of the church is Jesus Christ and he is the essential Lord, the essential substance of the entire universe. He is essential to your existence. Everything exists to worship him, it was created for him, by him, through him. The universe holds together by the word of his power. If he were to lift his sovereign hand, the molecules in your body would fly apart. Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, is essential to the existence of everything and he has made the church his main focus, the most important work, the reason for history is to form a body of redeemed sinners who will worship him into eternity. That is the purpose that we have to go through this fallen world, is because God is calling redeemed sinners to himself. The church is essential to the Lord.

It's worth repeating again what the church is. It is the collection of all redeemed sinners who are being gathered to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who rescued them. This was his eternal purpose. Ephesians 1:4 says this, "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him." He chose us in eternity past. This was far before he said, "Let there be light." He had this in mind.

"He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." Again we see the purpose here is the glory of his grace. This whole thing has been done and formed so that people would glorify him in his grace and for his grace.

"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight." In the fullness of time, Jesus Christ entered into this fallen world and he shed his blood in order to secure for himself a church, a body of people who would love him and be devoted to him throughout eternity.

"He made known to us the mystery of His will." So after having purchased our pardon, he worked through history to make sure that the mystery of his will came to your ears, that it was made known to you so that you would believe and follow him and be counted among those who have been redeemed.

"According to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, after listening to the

message of truth, the gospel of your salvation--having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise." He has done all of this for his church.

How essential is the church to God? It was his eternal purpose, all of history sovereignly arranged in order to create it because God wanted his Son to receive maximum glory for eternity. Everything that he did, he didn't just create angels to worship Jesus, they're already doing that, they're already doing that, but for whatever reason God decided to save sinners like you and me by the blood of his Son because we have no righteousness in ourselves. The only glory that we can glory in is the glory of Jesus Christ and that was his eternal purpose. That's just incredible.

How essential is this church? He shed his blood for it, to save and purify a people for himself. Could there be anything more precious than the church of Jesus? Anything more precious? Think of this. The worst thing that God has ever experienced is the cross and it was painful for Jesus, the Son, and it was painful for the Father to inflict wrath on his Son. It was painful for the Spirit to forsake the Son and yet he did all of this in order to purchase your pardon, in order to purify for himself a body of believers known as the church. That is how essential the church is to Jesus.

How essential is it? He calls it his bride. He calls the church his bride. When you marry somebody, you have chosen of all the people in the world to devote yourself to this one person, to devote all of the care and attention that you can to their care, and Jesus calls the church his bride.

He also calls the church his body. Colossians 1:18, "He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church." So closely tied to Jesus that we are his body. He dwells in us. We are his hands and feet in this world.

He nourishes and cherishes us, Ephesians 5 says. His church.

He has given us gifts to all of the members for the purpose of building up the church. When Saul of Tarsus was persecuting the church, Jesus took it personally and he confronted Saul on the road to Damascus and said, "Why are you persecuting Me?" Anyone who challenges, persecutes, causes trouble for the church is causing trouble for Jesus. They are opposing Jesus, and when you oppose his church, he takes it personally

and he will not allow that to go on forever. He has promised that the gates of hell will not overpower his church.

It is so essential that he calls it his temple, the center place of worship. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul says this, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him," that's referring to those that want to cause divisions in the church, for you are the temple of God, "the temple of God is holy."

It is so essential that one day he will destroy everything in the universe except the church. That's amazing, isn't it? The day of the Lord will come like a thief in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all of these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning and the elements will melt with intense heat. But according to his promise, we are looking for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. As we read last week, the new Jerusalem will come down out of heaven like a bride prepared for her husband in all of her glory, presented to the Son who is the only one worthy to receive her, who purified her himself.

Is the church essential? Is the church essential? If the church is that precious to the Lord of all creation, why is it not that precious to you and me? And you think about this, what is the purpose for which he has called us? 1 Peter 2:9-10 says this, "you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, A holy nation, A people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Do you see that? You and me are the same race, the chosen race, the people of God. We've been called out of our former cultures to be a chosen race for him, a new race, and you and I in that are one and that is what has been accomplished by Christ for the purpose that we would proclaim his excellencies for eternity.

And that is our eternal purpose but what is the purpose of the church now today? Why are we left here? You know this, it's to proclaim this truth in a lost and dying world, it is to shine as lights this gospel of the glory of Christ. Listen to this, this illustrates this, I think, very well. "A vision of lost souls," by William Booth. It says,

"I saw a dark and stormy ocean. Over it the black clouds hung heavily; through them every now and then vivid winds moaned, and the waves rose and foamed, towered and broke, only to rise and foam, tower and break again.

In that ocean I thought I saw myriads of poor human beings plunging and floating, shouting and shrieking, cursing and struggling and drowning; and as they cursed and screamed they rose and shrieked again, and then some sank to rise no more.

And I saw out of this dark angry ocean, a mighty rock that rose up with its summit towering high above the black clouds that overhung the stormy sea. And all around the base of this great rock I saw a vast platform. Onto this platform, I saw with delight a number of the poor struggling, drowning wretches continually climbing out of the angry ocean. And I saw that a few of those who were already safe on the platform were helping the poor creatures still in the angry waters to reach the place of safety.

On looking more closely I found a number of those who had been rescued, industriously working and scheming by ladders, ropes, boats and other means more effective, to deliver the poor strugglers out of the sea. Here and there were some who actually jumped into the water, regardless of the consequences in their passion to 'rescue the perishing.' And I hardly know which gladdened me the most--the sight of the poor drowning people climbing onto the rocks reaching a place of safety, or the devotion and self-sacrifice of those whose whole being was wrapped up in the effort for their deliverance.

As I looked on, I saw that the occupants of that platform were quite a mixed company. That is, they were divided into different 'sets' or classes, and they occupied themselves with different pleasures and employments. But only a very few of them seemed to make it their business to get the people out of the sea.

But what puzzled me most was the fact that though all of them had been rescued at one time or another from the ocean, nearly everyone seemed to have forgotten all about it. Anyway, it seemed the memory of its darkness and danger no longer troubled them at all. And what seemed equally strange and perplexing to me was that these people did not even seem to have any care--that is any agonizing care--about the poor perishing ones who were struggling and drowning right before their very eyes... many of whom were their own husbands and wives, brothers and sisters and even their own children."

That puts it in perspective, doesn't it, that the purpose of the church left here in this dark and dying world is to shine the hope of the glory of Christ, to reach out a hand to pull sinners out of drowning in their sea of sin, to point to the hope of Christ, to show them how to know him and follow him. We have a Great Commission in this world to make this gospel of Jesus known and in order to gather all who believe and teach them how to follow their Master.

The church in this world is the pillar and the buttress of the truth. We're the only ones that have the light of the eternal hope of the gospel, the only answer to these lost souls. The only ones. We are their only connection between this world and eternal life. Is the church essential? It is more essential than oxygen. It is more essential than all the governments, services, and institutions in the history of the world combined. It is more precious than all the gold in Fort Knox, more precious than your home, than your state, than your country and your planet. The church is the most precious thing on the earth and it is the most essential thing.

It is with that backdrop that we come to the book of Revelation, and as you may remember, the Apostle John has just had a terrifying vision of the glorious Christ in chapter 1. He says here in verse 10,

10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, 11 saying, "Write in a book what you see, 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." 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; 13 and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. 14 His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. 15 His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. 19 Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Just quickly we'll talk about this vision here and what these things signify.

First of all, the voice like a trumpet. In all New Testament occurrences, you see a trumpet signifying the coming of the Lord, the day of the Lord and the day of judgment. You can see that in Matthew 24:31, 1 Corinthians 15:52, and 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Trumpets signify warfare also in Judges 3:27 and Ezekiel 7:14. Trumpets were used at coronations for kings when they would publicly announce the new king has just been installed. Worship processions were preceded and accompanied by trumpet blasts as well as sacrificial offerings. It's basically saying this is really important. Listen up.

These seven churches are addressed and they are churches on a circular route in its modern-day Turkey, Asia Minor. They go in sequential order and there are seven of them chosen because seven is symbolic for completeness, and if you were to composite all of these churches, it addresses the church all throughout history. Why has God chosen these seven churches? It's because any church that reads through this can identify themselves within these seven churches. There's not a single church could work through this and make it through unscathed or unaddressed. They are real churches but they are chosen because they apply to all of us.

The seven golden lampstands, as we see, represent the churches and it is clear that they are represented as lampstands because lamps, the purpose of a lamp is to give light to a dark room. That is the purpose of these churches, they give light in a dark room, and you see here where Christ is portrayed in the midst of the lampstands. The idea is that he is moving in and among them back and forth. It's almost like he's hovering among them. He's not just walking past them, he's attending to them, and what you see here is that Christ, as I said earlier, Christ is here among his churches. He walks among us. He sees us and he knows us.

He is portrayed as the Son of Man, and this has obvious connections to the gospels where Jesus is often referred to as the Son of Man. He calls himself the Son of Man. There's also some amazing similarities with Daniel 7 and the Old Testament. The prophet Daniel has this amazing vision of the future and I would just encourage you to look that up later, Daniel 7:9-10. Daniel 7:9-10, it's really remarkable the similarities. In verse 13 of the same chapter of Daniel, he says, "I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days," another word for God, "And was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed."

So now as we work through the description of how Jesus revealed himself here, it is not entirely literal. So Jesus is not, he does not always look like this. When we see him in heaven, he may portray himself in a different way but for the purpose here, he puts all of these things together to convey power and glory. It has a tremendous, it's to have an emotive impact on you, and the truth is, if Christ were to fully reveal his glory in its fullest measure, we would be instantly killed. I need to say that again. If Christ were to fully unveil his glory, we would be instantly killed. You think about this, so just the power of the sun itself we could never come close to and that was created by the word of his power among billions of stars and a vast expanse of space where there's billions of galaxies and he created that. But here in this chapter, he condenses his glory into the shape of a Son of Man and it is enough to cause John to faint out of sheer terror, and it is just a small picture of the full glory of Jesus.

He has a long robe and a golden sash which points to his royal dignity. His white hair and head also present a dignified picture of wisdom and experience. He's old, is what's communicated here, and he is wise. And his eyes blazing with fire signify that he sees all things. Everywhere he looks, there's no darkness that can hide from him. If he looks there, that area lights up. And it also signifies that he is coming in judgment. His bronze feet also have allusions to Daniel 10, and these emphasize his glory and strength. Feet in the ancient world often portrayed the direction of one's life and so here Christ is shown to be mighty, to be stable, and to be absolutely pure like refined metal, metal that's been refined in a fire. He is absolutely pure.

He is shown to be holding in his right hand the angels of the seven churches like stars. And are these angels actually messengers or pastors? These angels of the seven churches

where are they? Are they actual angels? Are they pastors? Are they just messengers carrying the letters? We don't know for sure but the point is that they are like lights from heaven delivering God's word to these churches and God is there holding them. He is sovereign over them.

And it says here that a sword came from his mouth. This goes back to Isaiah 11, it says, "But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked." Then later in Revelation 19:15 he says, "From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron." So this sword is by his word he judges the world. It is his word that is the standard. It is his word that is the power by which he judges. And by the word of his mouth, he will cast Satan into the lake of fire. By the word of his mouth, he will destroy the universe just like he created it. It will require almost no effort from him to do so and this is the power of our Savior.

And it says he has a shining face like the sun shining in its full strength, like his face shone on the Mount of Transfiguration. The kind of glory that comes from this makes you squint, it makes you cower, it makes you realize how small you are, and as we saw, it was terrifying. You know, last week imagining putting yourself there and turning around and seeing this sight before you, feeling the strength leave your body and you just crumple to the floor out of sheer terror.

Then the most comforting words in Scripture, stop being afraid as this Savior, as this Lord, as this glorious one puts his hand on your shoulder and says, "Don't be afraid." For the one who is serving God, there's no need to fear his presence. And if this God is for you, who can be against you? If this God is with you and on your side, if it is his will that you are carrying out, then we have nothing to fear. If you don't have to fear him, then you have absolutely nothing to fear. We can do his will with absolute courage knowing that he is the one that has given us the charter.

So as we said last week, why does he show up so dramatically? If you look through Scripture, every time God shows up like this it's because he has something to say. He doesn't just do a fireworks display just so that you enjoy it. This isn't just for fun. He's not just showing off. The purpose that he does this is, yes, so that you will worship him, but it is because he wants you to listen to him, and just as he said at the Transfiguration when his face shone like the sun and Peter, you know, not knowing what he says, "Hey, let's build some tabernacles for these guys," and God the Father shows up in a cloud and says, "This is My Son. Listen to Him."

So we're going to listen to him in chapters 2 and 3 here, and I want you to notice how this presence, this amazing overwhelming presence of Jesus among his churches is a constant theme and they are constantly calling their attention back to this vision of him as he walks through the churches. These local churches that we'll examine, they include both true believers and within their midst there are false converts, and they are all addressed as though they are a part of those local churches. And for each of them, he reminds them of

his glory and character, he commends them for the good works that they have done, if they have any, and he confronts areas of sin that they need to repent of, and then he exhorts them to repent and promises rewards and consequences. So as we go through this, I just want you to have those things in mind and keep this question in mind as well: what kind of church is essential to Jesus? What kind of church is essential to Jesus, because as we will see, not every local church is essential to Jesus. Not every local church is essential to him.

Okay, starting in chapter 2, verse 1,

1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place--unless you repent.

Okay, stop right there. If I were to say to you, "Hey, you guys are doing a great job persevering, you're holding fast to the Lord, you're fighting off false prophets, you are dealing with these other guys, the Nicolaitans, but you know what? You need to grow in your love." What do you think your self-assessment would be? "Hey, I'm doing pretty good," right? "We're doing pretty good." And God says here that if, I mean, just imagine the shock of this. You know, you're gutting it out fighting off these false prophets and God says, "You've left your first love and if you don't repent, I'm removing your lampstand because you don't represent Me well in this city." We need to have our eyes opened to what matters to Jesus. So we'll get to that in a little bit.

You've left your first love.

5 'Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place--unless you repent. 6 Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'

And as we work through the rest of these churches, I want you to notice these things. He repeats this phrase, "He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." That phrase is used often in prophetic literature and when Jesus was speaking in parables, and the purpose in those parables was to conceal the truth from those who did not have ears to hear. Those who did have ears to hear would be impacted by the truth of

the parables and they would learn from them and they would change based on the truth of those parables. But for those who don't have ears to hear, the parables have almost no impact on them and that is a judgment of God to conceal, to make his truth a little bit harder to reach for those who don't have ears to hear. And here's the thing: if this does not have an impact on you, you are already lost. The true believer will be impacted by the truth that Jesus is saying here. If it doesn't have an impact on you, it makes no imprint on your soul, you don't care about it and it doesn't affect what you say, do, or think, you are already lost and you don't have ears to hear and I fear for you.

Verse 8,

8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until 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 by the second death.'

12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: 13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15 So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: 19 I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. 20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit

adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. 23 And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. 24 But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them--I place no other burden on you. 25 Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. 26 He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, To him I will give authority over the nations; 27 and He shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this:

Just a quick note. The seven spirits of God is a symbolic allusion to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is everywhere and he is complete, just so you don't get confused. And the seven stars, says this,

'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

Stop right there. You have a name that you are alive but you are dead. Your reputation with other people may not be accurate. Jesus Christ alone knows the true state of the church. You have a name that you are alive but you are dead.

2 'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. 3 So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. 4 But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

7 "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: 8 'I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. 9 Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie--I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. 10 Because you

have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; 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 out of heaven from My God, and My new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

One last one.

14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16 So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17 Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked,

Just really quick. Your self-understanding is not always accurate. You might believe that you are rich, that you are doing well when the opposite is actually true and Jesus Christ alone knows the truth of it. He says,

18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 21 He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Now I read all of that to you because obviously we're not going to go through all of the details of what each of those things means, but I want to pull from this what it is that Jesus values from the church, but first I want to start with what he knows. What he knows. In verse 2 of chapter 2 he says, "I know your deeds, your toil and your perseverance." How does he know this? It's because he's here. He sees everything. He knows your work. He knows how you operate. He knows the good things that you do and the bad. There it said that he knew how they did not tolerate evil men and he tested the false prophets. He knew that they persevered and they endured for his name's sake and had not grown weary.

In Smyrna he says, "I know your tribulation and your poverty." And he knew that even though that they were going through a hard time, that they were physically poor, that they were spiritually rich. He also knew the blasphemy of those who were living among them of the synagogue of Satan. In verse 13, to the church of Pergamum he says, "I know where you dwell. I know where you live. I know what it's like for you. I know the challenges you face, that Satan's throne is in your backyard and yet you still hold fast to my name. You do not deny my faith." In verse 19 to Thyatira, he says, "I know your deeds, your love, faith, service, perseverance, and that you're growing in these things." He knows the difference between where you started and where you are today. He knows how far you've come. As we said in chapter 3, verse 1, to Sardis, he says, "I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive but you're dead." He knows the hypocrisy that is there. He knows the reality of whether your deeds truly are worthy of the gospel, in line with his character, whether they come from your heart. In Revelation 3:8, he says, "I know your deeds." Again, he knows that they have little power. He knows that they have kept his word and that they have not denied his name. And then to Laodicea he says, "I know that you lack zeal, that you're neither hot nor cold."

Jesus is the only one that sees things as they really are. Other Christians can have an inaccurate view. Your reputation among other churches can not be accurate, it can be untrue, as we said of Smyrna and Sardis, and your own view of yourself can be inaccurate. In fact, with Laodicea where they felt that they were in need of nothing, is the greatest indicator that they were sorely lacking in the spiritual fruit that was necessary to bring honor to Christ there, the fact that they felt that they needed nothing.

So what does Jesus value in his church pulling from all of these different churches and what he says to them? First, he values hard work. Not work in order to earn salvation but he values toil and service. He commends the church at Ephesus for this.

2. He values steadfastness, that is perseverance or endurance. He values that you hold onto the faith through the middle of trial and adversity, that you grow in your commitment and your love and your devotion to him through the midst of opposition.

3. He values doctrinal purity. He values it when you fight for the truth, when you are willing to be discerning about false doctrine and you're willing to run off the wolves that teach things that are not true about God; that you put false teachers to the test; that you abstain from idolatry.

4. He values moral purity in his church, that his people abstain from sexual immorality as 1 Thessalonians says, that God will not, he will avenge those who defraud their brothers or sisters in this way in sexual immorality. He values moral purity and he wants us to defend the church from sexual immorality. He wants us to run off those who are committed to a life of immorality. You see, the church is first about Jesus and then it's about you. It's about us coming to Jesus in faith and repentance, valuing what he values.

5. He values love, agape love. As 1 Corinthians 13 says without love you are nothing, without love it is useless. Ephesus, he says, "I will remove your lampstand if you do not

repent of your lack of love." The fruit of the Spirit is love. That's how you know it's real is that you begin to produce the fruit of love in your life. And what is love? It is love that lays down itself for the sake of another, lays down its life for its friends. That is love. Love is patient and kind, it does not insist on its own way, it is gentle. We know that we have come to know God by our love for one another and that is how the world knows that we are Christians, that we belong to Jesus, by our love for one another. And this is how the body grows, we speak the truth, not just the truth, the truth in love, Ephesians 4.

So God values hard work, steadfastness, doctrinal purity, moral purity, love, faith. Faith is trust in God to keep his promises which leads you to do his will while you wait for him to rescue you. Faith trusts God with what's going on in the world and focuses on following him through the midst of the darkness. And God values growth in his church. A church that has stopped growing spiritually in their character is a dead church. A church that stagnates is a dead church that God will either discipline or completely remove its witness.

And then lastly, God values zeal. That means eagerness. That's where he calls out the church at Laodicea. What was their main problem at Laodicea is that they were complacent, they were self-satisfied, they lacked zeal for the things of God? They lacked that drive to do what they did for God's glory. They settled into a rich, comfortable, complacency where they felt that they were good the way they were.

And of the seven churches, only two didn't have anything that Christ was calling them to repent of. Only two of them were ones where God says, "I don't have anything to say to you except hold on." That was the church at Smyrna that was going through tribulation and poverty and were about to face severe persecution, and the second one was Philadelphia where they kept the word of God despite having little power and despite persecution. They did not deny the name of Christ but rather persevered in their doctrine and in their commitment to follow his word. Those are the only two.

So when you think of that, what is the likelihood that we are one of those two churches with nothing to repent of? Which one are we? I would say based on our circumstance, that we are in danger of two, we are in danger of becoming Ephesus, and we are in danger of becoming Laodicea. Those are the two. Danger of loving doctrine but one that does not love its neighbor, one that is not zealous to reach out to the lost, one that is not zealous to care for each other's needs in a way that is sacrificial. That is one, one that does not care to listen to the needs of others, one that does not care to follow through on helping one another and Jesus says, "Repent or I will remove your lampstand."

And the last one is Laodicea where they thought they were rich, where they thought they were in need of nothing, where they felt like, "Hey, we're doing pretty good." This is important for us to recognize because the second that you believe that you don't need this, is when you're at the most danger. It is Christians who are humble before the Lord, willing to see their own weaknesses, willing to repent, those are the ones that he shows mercy to.

The kind of church that he finds nonessential is one that fights for doctrine but lacks love, a church that perseveres but puts up with false teachers and immoral people in the congregation, a church that has love, faith, service and perseverance but who tolerates immorality and false doctrine, a church that has a good reputation but is actually not growing and is spiritually dead, and lastly, the church that lacks zeal and is self-satisfied and complacent, believing they are fine the way they are and have no need of change. That is the church that God says is not essential. "I will remove your lampstand. I will spit you out of My mouth. I will come to you with the sword of My mouth and I will put some of you in a sickbed and some of you I will kill because you have dishonored the name of this glorious Christ." And that's what it means to take the name of the Lord in vain, you bear the name of Christ and yet you do not carry it out with doctrinal integrity and moral integrity and love and faith with perseverance.

This is why five of the seven churches are called to repent. "Remember from where you have fallen. Repent and do the deeds that you did at first or else I'm coming to remove your lampstand. Therefore repent or else I'm coming to you quickly and I will make war against those immoral people with the sword of My mouth. I gave them time to repent and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her into a bed of sickness and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches the minds and hearts and will give to each one of you according to your deeds. So remember of what you have received and heard it, keep it and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know what hour I come to you. And so because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth because you say I am rich and have become wealthy, in need of nothing, and you do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. Those whom I love I reprove and discipline, therefore be zealous and repent." And that is the final characteristic, this is the final characteristic that Jesus is looking for, that when you recognize that he is speaking to you, that you get in gear and you turn to him desperately to repent because those are the ones that find safety and mercy and grace, and those that do are called overcomers.

This is what he says over and over here. Christ is looking for a church that overcomes all of these trials and temptations. He's looking for a church that overcomes false teachers, that perseveres through persecution, that remains faithful unto death, that does not tolerate sin in her midst, that repents when she recognizes her sinful weaknesses. This is the church that Jesus deems essential and as he says here, because Jesus has overcome the world, we through him can overcome the world, and we don't have to be overcome by evil, but instead, Romans 12:21, we can overcome evil with good. And who is the one who overcomes the world? It is he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. This is all in the New Testament.

Then in our passage today, God makes promises to those who are overcomers, promises of eternal life and this is a characteristic of a believer. This is called the perseverance of the saints, the ones who overcome, and again the word for overcoming means to have victory; to conquer; to prevail. In 2:7, "To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the

tree of life which is in the Paradise of God." 2:11 says he will not be hurt by the second death. 2:17 says that he will be given some of the hidden manna and I will make him a white stone and with a new name written on it. 2:26, I will give him authority over the nations. 3:5, I will not erase his name from the book of life. I will confess his name from before my Father and before his angels. To the one who overcomes in 3:12, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. He will not go out from it anymore 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 out of heaven from my God and my new name. Verse 21, he who overcomes I will grant him to sit down with me on my throne as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear. Let this have an impact on you. Let this renew your zeal for Christ and for what he cares about and there's nothing he cares about more than his church. And let us do it his way, because as we move into this new year, we'll be making decisions whether to go along with the way that the culture wants to do things, the way the culture wants us to do things, or whether it's the way that Christ wants us to do things. And if we're going to do church in this coming year, let's do it in a way that is essential, in a way that is essential to Jesus, with zeal and passion for the truth and out of love for one another that is devoted to the good of one another for his glory, and do that with perseverance no matter what comes, not fearing the trials that are coming. We don't even have to think about them, people. Jesus is with us. Let's focus on what he has called us to do.

So what is the essential church that Jesus wants us to be? One that is doctrinally pure, full of love and faith, morally pure, who perseveres through trial, who keeps growing, is zealous for his name, who repents when confronted with sin, and who overcomes the world by the blood of Jesus. Let us commit to that together and let's encourage each other in these things. Don't you want to live a zealous life? Don't you want to be zealous for the only thing that is going to last into eternity? Don't you want your work to build toward something eternal? Then let's not forsake assembling together that we may encourage one another to love and good deeds lest we be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. You don't have anything more important going on and I need you and you need me to remind each other of this. So let's turn to him, let's repent of our sins and, man, let's get after it for his glory.

Let's pray.

Lord, we acknowledge to You that You alone are worthy and that Your church is Your precious bride, the most important thing that's happening in the world. Lord, I pray that You would help us to do church in a way that is essential to You. Help us to repent of our sins. Lord, help us to avoid the pitfalls of Ephesus and Laodicea especially, to strengthen what remains, to love one another, to be zealous for the faith and the hope and the perseverance that are in Christ. We ask for Your help in this, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.