

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

The Seven Churches Part 2

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Revelation 3

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Revelation chapter 3. This is part two of the message that we began last week and it will be helpful I'm sure to review what we learned at that time. Last week we began studying the 7 letters that are sent out by Jesus as he conducts a walking inspection of his church. We agreed that the 7 churches are to be understood as real churches in the first century and simultaneously they are to be understood as representative of all churches in all places over the entirety of church history until the return of the Lord. This is partly why they contain so much symbolic language. Symbolic language is ideal for communicating in two temporal realms simultaneously. Before we read chapter 3 let me review the list that we developed last week from chapter 2 of the things that Jesus commended and also rebuked in the churches that he surveyed:

What Jesus Commends:

- 1. Work, labour and patience**
- 2. Intolerance (towards "Christian" evil doers and also false teachers)**

3. **Perseverance (in the word and under persecution)**
4. **Love (for God and others)**
5. **Loving service – one to another**
6. **Faith (prayerful dependence upon the Lord in times of trial and difficulty)**

Some of these positive traits were mentioned multiple times and indeed as we read through chapter 3 we will see many of these same things commended afresh. In terms of what Jesus rebukes in his churches we noted the following:

What Jesus Rebukes:

1. **Loveless orthodoxy**
2. **Lack of discernment**
3. **Cultural compromise**
4. **Spiritual adultery**

Let's carry on reading then and we will add to these lists as we go. Hear the Word of God this morning from Revelation chapter 3:

^{1c}“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

²Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before ^fGod.

³Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

^{4f}You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

⁵He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

^{6c}“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.””

^{7c}“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, “*He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens*”’:^f

Just briefly you may be interested to know that there are two churches in this list of 7 who receive only commendation and no rebuke and the church in Philadelphia is one of those along with the church in Smyrna. You will hear Philadelphia commended for things we have already noted last week such as good works and perseverance in the Word and in the faith.

^{8c}“I know your works. See, I have set before you ^fan open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

⁹Indeed I will make *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you.

¹⁰Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.

Again, briefly let me just comment on a phrase which has some controversy around it. That line “keep you from the hour of trial” could equally be translated as “keep you in the hour of trial” meaning that as they go through trial they will be kept firm and safe by God. The Greek can mean both equally and only the context can decide the matter. Some have tried to use this passage to suggest that God will not allow his true church, the church that he LOVES to go through the Tribulation but that is certainly not what is being said here and that doesn’t at all line up with the rest of the Bible or even the rest of this chapter. It simply cannot be argued that because God loves you he will not permit you to face trials. All of the Bible shouts out against that:

12 Beloved, **do not be surprised** at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 Peter 4:12. NRSV)

Later in this very chapter of Revelation we will hear Jesus say:

¹⁹I reprove and discipline those whom I love.

So that cannot be the meaning. Besides, the reason they are being either preserved or exempted is stated as being because they have already persevered under trial! So that whole argument needs to be laid to rest. I think it more likely that it means that Jesus will shelter them from further trials because they’ve already shown their worth in battle. The Lord never allows us to be tested beyond what we can bear and I think this simply means that he’s seen enough. The judgement has been rendered and proven. Let’s carry on with verse 11:

¹¹^fBehold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.

¹²He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. 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 *I will write on him* My new name.

¹³“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

¹⁴“And to the angel of the church ^fof the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

¹⁵“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.

¹⁶So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither ^fcold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

¹⁷Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—

¹⁸I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may

see.

¹⁹As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

²¹To him who overcomes I will grant to sit 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.”” (Revelation 3:1-22. NKJV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

What Jesus Commends:

We'll carry on then by completing our list of what Jesus commends in a church. We saw him commending several things we've noted already, namely good works and perseverance but in Revelation 3:4 we see something new:

^{4E}You have a few names even in Sardis who have **not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.**

⁵He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Revelation 3:4-5. NKJV)

7. Personal Holiness

Even in a church that is generally bad and even described as dead by the Lord Jesus, God holds individuals accountable for their personal holiness. He commends individuals within a generally fallen church for the purity of their personal walk. They have not defiled their garments the text says. They were given white robes and they kept them white, they didn't run back to the gutter from which they were lifted to wallow with the pigs. As such, Jesus says, their names will not be smeared out from the Book of Life. This phrase is somewhat complicated so we will have to explain it briefly. Many scholars see in this phrase an example of the breadth of the salvation process as depicted in the Bible, as though Jesus were in the act of writing your name down – he was working grace to you, he was bringing help into your life, breathing spirit and renewal into your soul but your resistance – your refusal to separate yourself from the filth of the world - ultimately resulted in your being smudged out. The actual Greek word means to “smear out” and so that is quite likely the idea. That is the meaning behind the teaching of Jesus in Luke's Gospel where he says:

³²Remember Lot's wife. ³³Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. (Luke 17:32. NRSV)

The Angel of God was leading Lot's wife out of judgement and into salvation and at the last possible moment she turned back. She went as far into redemption as it is possible to go without being finally saved. In the very act of her name being written in the book of life it was smudged out. Real Christians seek holiness by the grace of God and are commended by Jesus for so doing.

This is exactly what is taught in Hebrews 5 and 6. There we are told that it is possible for people to be enlightened, to partake of the Holy Spirit and to experience some liberation from sin and addiction, to give some initial evidence that the grace of God is at work in their lives but then to fall back and fall away and to fail utterly to finally and fully press forward into salvation. Listen to me friend, I fear that this is the story of several people in our midst. They have tasted, they have partaken, they have felt the upward lift out of addiction but because they refused to walk forward into personal holiness, in the very act of their name being written in the book of life it is smeared eternally out. Press forward. Keep your robes white. Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

That completes our list of what Jesus commends but we have a few more things yet to add to our list of what he rebukes.

What Jesus Rebukes:

5. False security, or lack of vigilance

The church in Sardis is rebuked for lack of vigilance and its false sense of security; look at verses 1-2:

¹"I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

²Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before ³God. (Revelation 3:1-2. NKJV)

Sardis was a little bit like Quebec City in that it was a fortified city upon a hill. If you know your Canadian history, the reason you are hearing this sermon in English instead of French is because the occupiers of Quebec City trusted in their topography in the same way Sardis trusted in theirs. Quebec City was built on cliffs that were so steep on one side that they didn't bother to guard or

fortify it, believing that side to be unscaleable. And of course, the British scaled it at night and routed the defenders and won the war. Likewise TWICE in their history Sardis had left the sheer cliff at one side of their city unguarded and TWICE armies had scaled it at night and routed the defenders. The city was becoming proverbial for its FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY and its SLACKNESS in terms of its defences and as we see here, the church had taken on the personality of its host culture.

The church seems to be operating without any fear or awareness of danger whatsoever. Jesus is not impressed. He says in 3:3:

Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. (Revelation 3:3. NKJV)

Jesus can frequently be found in the Gospels urging watchfulness upon his disciples:

⁴²Watch therefore, for you do not know what ^fhour your Lord is coming.

⁴³But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

⁴⁴Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matthew 24:42-44. NKJV)

Jesus told us to watch the signs and to be prepared but he also said we did not know the hour. From this we understand that we will never know for sure when the Day of the Lord will be upon us but we should know when it is getting closer and when it falls on us we should not be panicking like everyone else, rather we should be pointing to Scripture and saying: “This is where we are, this is what comes next and this how you should respond”; that is part of the job of the church and I think it is part of what Jesus is rebuking in this church in Sardis. They were not reading the signs, they were not reading events and they were woefully unprepared. It seems from the text that this church had yet to suffer persecution. We are told that they were well thought of and had a good reputation. Persecution at this time in the Roman Empire was very localised and it was not yet instigated by Rome it was at this time instigated by local Jewish synagogues. At this point in history the Romans considered Christianity to be a sub-set of Judaism and it was therefore afforded the same legal protections and rights as Judaism. What was happening in some cities was that the synagogue leaders were going to the Roman governors and making the case that Christians were not Jews. If they were successful then the legal protections vanished and the Jews were free to persecute them and to have them arrested and

sometimes executed by the Romans. That is why you have all of this “synagogue of Satan” stuff in the letters to Pergamos and Philadelphia. God there was saying that the so called “synagogue leaders” were actually servants of Satan and that God’s real synagogue in those cities was the faithful Christian church. The point is, none of this was happening yet in Sardis and they were acting as though it never would. They were being lulled into a false sense of security. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to make an application to modern day North America. I’ve told you before that in point of fact more Christians have been killed for their faith in the last 100 years than in the previous 1900 years combined – it just hasn’t happened here – YET. So we sleep in peace. Wake up and read the times.

Sardis was also trusting in her wealth. Sardis used to be the capital city of Croesus before they were absorbed into the Roman Empire and they were known throughout the world for their fabulous reserves of gold. “Rich as Croesus” used to be a saying in English though you rarely hear it now. These people thought they were in God’s good books because they were rich and at peace. They were living their best life now and they took this as proof of God’s favour. Jesus disabuses them of that notion. He says that the proof that you are saved is that you walk in holiness, not that you bath in money or that you sleep in peace. Those things are a dream and a deception. A lot of folks woke up to reality in North America on September 11th 2001. A lot of folks realized that they had been trusting in their wealth and their peace and so what did the terrorists hit? The trade towers and the Pentagon. Wealth and Pax Americana. False security is alive and well in the 21st century church.

6. Syncretism and mixture

Syncretism is not a word we use a lot, I recognize that, but it is the right word none the less. Syncretism means the blending of things that really don’t belong together. For example, you will often hear people express concern over the growing syncretism in Latin American expressions of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. A lot of native traditions and festivals are blended into Christian festivals in a way that puts completely opposite things side by side. This is what Jesus seems to be rebuking when he says:

¹⁵“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.

¹⁶So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither ^fcold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. (Revelation 3:15-

16. NKJV)

To understand this reference you have to know a little bit about the geography of the Lychnus Valley. Laodicea was a tremendously wealthy city, situated as it was at the crossroads of three major Roman roads in the Lychnus Valley. You couldn't go anywhere without passing through it and so it became a wealthy commercial centre and was also known for its banking institutions and its famous medical school. It was also known for its textile industry and produced much coveted black cloth from a peculiar local species of sheep. Rich as she was, Laodicea was famous in the ancient world for having bad water. Like Walkerton is in Canada, so Laodicea was in the ancient world. Nearby there were towns famous for their hot springs, nearby also were towns like Colossae famous for their fresh cold water, but Laodicea had neither. Her water arrived via long stone aqueducts and came out lukewarm, dirty and disgusting, filled with sediment that you didn't really want there. Now because "Lukewarm" in the English has the sense of "mediocrity" we tend to think Jesus is condemning them for being mediocre but that doesn't make sense. If Lukewarm is mediocre, then cold would be flat out terrible and why would Jesus rather they were flat out terrible instead of mediocre? No. Lukewarm here means "good for nothing". You can bath in hot water and you can drink cold water. Tepid dirty water is good for nothing. Jesus is saying that this church is good for nothing and indeed he can't find a single nice thing to say about them. They are a church in the middle, they are trying to have one foot in the wealth, technology and ideology of their host culture and one foot in the camp of the Lord and as a result they are actually in free fall because such a place does not exist. Such a place exists only in the lies of Satan.

7. Worldliness and Pride

We see this in Revelation 3:17-19:

¹⁷Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—

¹⁸I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

¹⁹As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. (Revelation 3:17-19. NKJV)

The Laodiceans think they have it all together, they are rich, like the folks from Sardis they are living their best life now, they think themselves in need of nothing and they do not realize how eternally dangerous a place that is to be. Blessed are the poor in Spirit for THEIRS is the Kingdom of heaven. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Self sufficiency is death to the Gospel. The Gospel seed only takes root in a heart that is humble and penitent before God. Martin Luther's 95 thesis began by asserting that the Christian life is fundamentally a DAILY EXERCISE in repentance. These folks didn't see it that way. The Laodiceans say that Christianity is a path to earthly blessing and to material prosperity and well being, but Jesus said:

“Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. (Mark 8:34. NKJV)

Christianity is about dying to the self and lowering the self and it is destroyed and utterly stamped out by the presence of pride, self sufficiency and contentment. This church didn't realize how much danger they were in because of their wealth. Wealth makes a person artificially secure. He begins to trust in it, he begins to find his identity in it and he begins to treat his money like a god. He receives from his money things he is meant to receive from God, things like security, identity and peace. He gives to his money things he was meant to give to God, like his time and his energy and his worship. That is why Jesus said: “How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”. (Mark 10:23) Wealth tends to destroy penitence and humility and Jesus rebukes this trend in one of his churches and he counsels them to seek refinement in the fire. Pray for suffering, pray for pain, pray for poverty so that you might save your souls, he says. Not exactly the prayer of Jabez is it? Is there a time to pray: “Oh God give me more!”? Sure there is. But rich people in danger of losing their souls to their money probably need to pray: “Oh God, take it all away! Give me ashes and dust and pain and loss that I might find you again!” There are different prayers for different seasons. This church needed less Jabez and more penitence. They were worldly, they were wealthy, they were proud and they were in peril and they sound a lot like us.

Application:

So once again I ask you, what do we do with a list like this? You have in your hands now a list from the Bible, from Jesus the head of this and every other church in the universe that sets forth what is good and what is bad among his people. And as I begin to evaluate me and us against

this list I have to be honest with you and say that I don't like what I see. I look at the list of what Jesus rebukes in a church and I think that I and we have been guilty of all of that. I have been lovelessly orthodox at times in my life. I have cared more about being right and about winning the argument than I have about loving God. I have fought sin with wrong weapons. Weapons of law and pride instead of love and gratitude and worship, I have done these things and you have done these things and we have done these things as a church. And I look at the issue of discernment. I confess that I have been lazy in my study of God's Word and mistakes have been made and I have permitted and endorsed things I should not have permitted and endorsed. That too is part of our story as a church. Why have we come so late to this Walk Through The Bible exercise? Why are we reading for the first time things we should have known long ago? And cultural compromise? Don't even get me started. Why is it that so many things don't bother us anymore? Is it because the Gospel gives us liberty or is it because our culture has stolen our conscience? And spiritual adultery? How much that is not God is worshipped in churches as God? And how am I and how are we any different than the church in Sardis? We too trust in our topography, our history, our polity and our money and we too have fallen asleep upon the walls. We say: "North America is an island, who can touch us here?" We say "the Puritans founded this land, surely Christianity will always be dominant." We say: "But our country is a democracy, surely we will never be marginalised or persecuted." We say "we are rich and rich people by and large are happy people and happy people by and large do not burn people at the stake over matters of theology." Fools. We left the back door open and the enemy is inside the house. We didn't watch. And we didn't guard our hearts. We are worldly, we are proud, we are rich and we are no good at repenting. We live in a culture that never tells us we've done wrong. A study was released by way of warning recently in Great Britain because in Great Britain for the last decade or so teachers have not been allowed to mark more than 3 spelling errors on any one paper submitted by a student lest that student feel discouraged. As a result there is now a generation of English people who cannot speak or spell in English! We live in a world where no one ever tells us that we're wrong and we've forgotten how to repent. And so many of us, how many of us I cannot know, but many of us, are so deep into the ways of the world that we are at risk of being the salt that has lost its saltiness. Spit out and trampled under foot, good for nothing in the eyes of the world but far worse, good for nothing in the eyes of God.

I look at that list and I can think of only one way to respond. Repent. I looked at that list on Tuesday as it emerged on my computer and that was my response. I fell to my knees in my

office filled with humility and penitence and I just knelt before the Lord in contrition. Have mercy o God. Take not thy holy Spirit from me. Take not thy unction from this church. Grant us the grace of repentance. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and renew a right spirit within me.

My friends I think there comes a time in many journeys when you have to admit that you have missed a turn somewhere and you make that decision to turn around and go back. That is what the word “repent” means. It means to turn around and go back. We missed a turn somewhere back in the 1960’s. When Christianity first started declining in this land we made some decisions about how we would respond to that and I must say, I am thoroughly convinced that they were the wrong decisions and I do not want to play this out any further. We’ve been 50 years down this road and I believe it leads only to hell. Let’s go back! I’m not saying everyone has been wrong and corrupt and unsaved for the last 50 years – even in Sardis, a dead church rebuked by the Lord there were some people who were walking rightly – I’m not saying everyone was wrong, I’m saying THIS ROAD IS WRONG! All of the cultural compromise, all of the tolerance, all of the easy believism and the false assurance and all of the worldliness – ITS WRONG! Let’s just repent and go back. Let’s just find where we went astray and pick up the trail again and follow it all the way back to Christ on the cross. That is the only response I can think of and the only one God has laid on my heart. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Worship team, will you come and lead us?