

## **Introduction**

It is hard to believe that three weeks have come and gone so quickly since I last stood here to preach. Melissa and I went down south to see our parents and to celebrate my mother-in-law's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. We took the time to stop and visit the Ark Encounter. And we went up to Sheboygan to see our now 1-month-old granddaughter. The time has just flown. But I am still mindful of preaching that message a month ago on “The Church of What's Cool and Exciting.” The church in Sardis was regarded as being alive. They were what we call today a “seeker sensitive” church. They became a church the world could love as they were popular with the people of their city. To the world this church was alive, but according to Jesus's evaluation, it was in fact dead. No doubt they had learned the art of hiding the offensive aspects of the gospel in order to be accepted by the masses. The Sardis church shows us that what makes a church popular in the world is not what really matters to Christ. In contrast, we turn this morning to the church in the town of Philadelphia, and although we do not see a church of what is cool and exciting, we DO see a church of what really does matter to Jesus.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main point of Jesus's letter to the church in Philadelphia is to affirm and strengthen the church in their grasp of the things that matter most. To be alive and faithful to Jesus, every church must understand and affirm the things that matter most to Jesus. So, what are the things that matter most in Christ's churches? We see the answers in this letter.

### **I. Not a Church's Social Prominence.**

The church in Sardis had social prominence. They were big enough to be known by the world and have a reputation of being alive. Not so much the church in Philadelphia. Of the Philadelphia church, Jesus said, “I know that you have but little power.” It may sound like a critique but it is not. Jesus does not have a word of criticism to put upon this church. He later tells them to hold fast what they had. Commentators agree that “having little power” is a reflection of their prominence in the city. It would mean things more like they were not a large church; they were not a wealthy church; they were not a prestigious church. They were just that seemingly overlooked humble group of believers in the relatively small town of Philadelphia. You see, Philadelphia itself was the smallest of the seven cities mentioned in the Revelation. It was not unimportant, but it was not prominent. So it was with the church in the city.

Oftentimes it is not only the world but also churches that measure themselves and evaluate themselves by statistics of their “power.” How big? How much activity? How many ministries? How exciting? How many people go there? Enthusiasm often grows out of these kinds of measurements. But those measurements in and of themselves are a wrong basis for enthusiasm in the church. When Jesus looks at the church in Philadelphia, he notes that its power-ratings do NOT stand out. What matters is NOT how powerful they are. We need to make sure that when we declare a church to be a good church or a strong church or the kind of church we ought to pursue being, that we are not using statistics of power as the basis.

The matters churches do need to be concerned with are the other issues that Jesus highlights in this letter. Among those is, first . . .

### **II. Knowing the Savior It Worships**

At the beginning of each of these letters to the seven churches, Jesus presents himself in a particular way which relates to the church to which he is writing. To the church in Philadelphia, Jesus designates himself as "the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens." Now I could preach an entire sermon on each of these titles, but I want to keep them together with the context of the words that Jesus is writing to this church.

He is "the holy one." My 2-and-a-half-year-old grandson's favorite song is "Holy, Holy, Holy." Last Sunday he stood between Melissa and me in church singing "Ho-We, Ho-We" to the top of his lungs. I am glad it is his favorite. I hope it still will be when he is 20. Anytime the word HOLY is used, it reflects the God-ness of God. Jesus is the holy one. He is holy. But in this phrasing, the holy one, refers to Christ as the Messiah. In Mark 1:24, the unclean spirit cried out to Jesus, "I know who you are—the Holy One of God." In Luke 1:35, the angel tells Mary that the child to be born, who will receive the throne of his father David, will be called HOLY. In John 6:69, Peter tells Jesus, "we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus is the one who is set apart to God as Messiah. He is the king in David's line who rules the kingdom of heaven. He is the spotless and holy lamb of God who takes away sin.

But not only does he call himself holy; he also says he is true. That is he is the genuine thing. He is not an imposter but the true Messiah. He stands in contrast to the Jews who live in Philadelphia. Jesus says of them, "They are a synagogue of Satan; they say they are Jews and are not but lie." That is because true Jews believe in Jesus. Jesus is the true Messiah—the way the truth and the life—and if you believe in him, you are a true Jew. But if you do not, you will be cast aside. As the true one, Jesus also is a keeper of his promises.

Now, further sounding the note of Messiah, Jesus says he has the key of David, who opens and shuts and no one can reverse or undo what he has done. This reference points back to chapter 1 where Jesus is presented as he who holds the keys of death and Hades. But it looks back further to Isaiah 22. There God called a man named Eliakim to be the steward over the household of the king. On his shoulder the Lord would place the key of the house of David. He would control access to the king. Even so Jesus is Lord over access to God. We draw near to the throne of grace because we have a great high priest-king in Jesus. When he opens the door, it cannot be shut, and when he shuts the door, it cannot be opened. He is Lord over salvation.

Melissa and I enjoyed our visit to the Ark encounter. And one of the aspects of God's design was of course to put a door in the ark. There were two great doors there in the exhibit which declare the necessity of entering through the open door in order to be saved by the ark when the rains fell and floods came. And when Noah and his family went in, the Lord "shut them up" in the ark. In John 10:9, Jesus said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved." But he is also the one who opens and the one who shuts it. Jesus alone grants access. He grants it to those who believe in him. He is the sovereign savior. He is the way the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through him. No doubt the Jews Jesus talks about here were saying to the Christians, you cannot get into heaven without becoming a Jew. But Jesus says when you believe in him you become a true Jew.

So one of those matters which is of the greatest importance when it comes to what really matters in the church is that the church is settled on Jesus as the holy one, the true one, the sovereign one, and the savior. At the top of the list of what really matters in the church is that the church has its worship centered on Christ. It is overwhelmed by his perfect purity and holiness. It stands amazed at his covenant faithfulness. It bows before his authority. It celebrates its access to God through

faith by the blood that he shed for it. Proper worship is focused on the character of God and of his Christ. If you go to a so-called church and the so-called worship is fixated on you, then something is very wrong. If our worship is fixated on anything about ourselves, it would be that we are unworthy and overwhelmed by his great and amazing love.

Knowing the Savior you worship is first among those things that matter most. What Matters Most in Christ's church is... Second,

### **III. Patient Endurance**

Down in verse 10, Jesus commends the fact that this church has kept his word about patient endurance. How did they patiently endure? Well, that is spelled out in verse 8. There Jesus writes, "I know you have but little power, and yet YOU HAVE KEPT MY WORD and have NOT DENIED MY NAME. What really matters in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is keeping his word and not denying his name.

A. Keeping his word—the church in Philadelphia gave attention to the word of Christ. One of the essential elements to a Christ-exalting church is the determined attention to his word. The word of Christ dwells richly in the church that is committed to what matters most. His word is preached. It is taught. It is memorized. It is shared inside and outside. To keep the word, you must know the word. And to know the word you must be taught the word. Preachers are to preach the WORD—not their thoughts and opinions and philosophies. From the scriptures comes the knowledge of God, of his commands, and of his promises and his wisdom. There is truth, understanding, rebuke, correction, and training in righteousness. So, keeping the word of Christ involves studying, teaching, reading, memorizing, and meditating. But keeping the word of Christ also involves holding to its truths without compromise. It is not only the act of communicating the word but also welcoming that word into your heart—believing it, embracing it, rejoicing in it. And finally, keeping the word of Christ means obeying it. Jesus spoke pointedly. It is recorded in John 14:15: "If you love me, you will KEEP my commandments." Again in v. 21 he said, "Whoever has my commandments and KEEPS them, he it is who loves me." To keep his word is to be both a hearer and a doer of his word.

The church of what really matters keeps the word of Christ, but it also does not deny his name. It is unashamed of the gospel of Christ. It is unashamed to be identified with who he is. It is bold. It does not trade Christ for another. It does not attempt to add others in alongside Christ so as not to offend the world. And when it comes to owning Christ exclusively as savior and Lord, it refuses to turn back or turn away. Even in the face of persecution or threat of harm, this church accepts whatever harm it must in order not to disown Christ. Persecution was clearly a reality in Philadelphia and it appears to have been led by the synagogue of Satan. Jesus and Paul had experienced the hostility of Jews as did early Christians everywhere. Their hostility was fueled and fomented by Satan himself. But whether there was persecution or not, this church was not turning back. They were not giving in. They would not disown Christ by word or by deed. Now that is what matters in the church—an unabashed faithfulness to Christ to follow him no matter what—even if one's family does not, even if you have to lose your job, even if you are thrown in jail, even if you are physically tortured, and even if you have to lose your life.

So here is what matters—knowing the Savior and enduring patiently. We turn next to a third element of what matters most in Christ's church. It is...

### **IV. Holding Fast**

Having commended this church, Jesus does not want them to get a big head. They must not fall prey to the assumption that simply because they have been faithful to this point they can quit striving. Jesus tells them to "hold fast what they have so that no one may seize their crown." No

Christian and no church can rest on its laurels. There is no coasting. There is no let up for those who will remain faithful to Christ. A truly Christ-pleasing church will not be lost in what it did in the past. It will always be alert for what it is doing in the present and what it will be doing in the future. The church that does not hold fast to what it has will be like a boat not tied to its moorings. It will quickly be washed out into the open waters by the currents and winds which blow against it. Most of the denominations in America today were once faithful to truth, but consider how many of them have not held fast to their original faithfulness. They have been blown out into the sea by the currents of doubt and skepticism and the gale of cultural moral decline. The Christianity of many denominations today would not be recognizable to those who were around in their early days. It is imperative that we be watchful and devoted to truth and resistant to the pressure from the outside world if as a church we would not have our crown seized and taken away.

Jesus told this church he was going to keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth. In Revelation, those "who dwell on the earth" refers to the unbelievers. So what Jesus is assuring the church is that he is going to keep them unto himself as this trial comes on unbelievers. How will he keep them? He will not take them out of the world, but he will keep them from the evil one. This does not mean they can take it easy. No, they must hold fast. The promise of God's keeping power is not a license for God's people to let up. In fact it is an incentive for us to strive even harder.

Recently, Jesse Ceron and I were discussing this fact and he gave me a great illustration. If you know Jesse, you know he is an avid fan of soccer. He said, "If I was playing soccer and God assured me that I would score three goals and win the game, I would not go out on the field and just sit there. I would play my hardest and do my best because of what I was assured. I would never give up. I would keep on trying, knowing, trusting, believing God would accomplish just what he promised." That is how the keeping power of Christ works with his exhortation to hold fast. I love singing that great song, "He will hold me fast." I almost tear up every time we sing it. And I know if he did not hold on to me, I would surely not be holding on to him. But the fact that he will hold me fast urges me also to hold fast to him.

What does this mean for you and for me? Seriously, we must each know the truth and be grounded in the faith. And we must be watchful. All of us must be voices that warn against drifting and against losing the ropes of our ship from its mooring to Christ himself as well as the unshakable truths of his word.

I see one more element of what matters most in Christ's church. It is

## **V. Hoping in Christ's Promises**

There are four assurances that Jesus gives to this church of little power.

A. First, there is the assurance of an open door. He who irresistibly opens doors and shuts doors has set before the church in Philadelphia an open door. On the one hand it may be seen as the door to the kingdom of heaven. By Jesus's blood and sacrifice the door of access to the King has been opened to them. It will be shut to those who refuse to come to God any other way.

But an open door is also a door of opportunity. Several times in Scripture the open door is an opportunity for gospel witness. Paul requested that the Colossians pray for him that God would open a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ. It should assure the church that is faithful to Christ and his word that he will set before them an open door of opportunity. In faithfulness to Christ, we must take advantage of the open door. We have opportunities to proclaim Christ to the

world outside. We have opportunities in every relationship. Let us be conscious of the open door of opportunity and with thankfulness enter by those doors to exalt Christ and make him known.

B. The second assurance of Christ to this church is that he will cause members of the synagogue of Satan to bow down at the church's feet and learn that he has loved this church. This assurance reflects the salvation of some of the very Jews who have been persecuting the Christians. They will come with sorrow and contrition that they have believed God was against the followers of Jesus, and they will come to the recognition that in fact this church is truly loved by the Lord. Yes, the faithful church of Jesus is an assembly of sinners who have been saved from God's wrath and who are LOVED by Christ. It is a love that will not let go. It is a love from which we cannot be separated. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?" "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." But not only are we assured of his love, the faithful church is privileged to see enemies of Christ come to reject their former hostility and join in following Christ, even those who have resisted the gospel with the greatest hostility, the Jews themselves. There is no hope for any Jew or any Gentile apart from the saving grace of God in Jesus who holds the key of the household of David. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to the Jew as well as to the Gentile.

C. A third assurance comes in vivid form to this church of what really matters. Christ says, "The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it." The imagery would resonate powerfully with the citizens of Philadelphia. This city was marked by Greek architecture. And what marks Greek architecture like a column? Columns and pagan temples were well known here. But what is notable about Philadelphia is that the city was near a number of volcanoes and was subject to earthquakes associated with their eruptions. The city was devastated by a severe earthquake in 17 AD and subsequently was often shaken by tremors. As a result many of the citizens had taken to living OUTSIDE the city to escape the danger of falling chunks of brick and mortar that crumbled whenever the earth shook.

What a contrast for true believers! They will be pillars in the temple of the one true God. They will stand permanently in his very presence. And they will never go out of it. In Psalm 27:4, David made this declaration: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." You see, the church of what really matters will be blessed by eternally partaking in what really matters.

Strikingly in the next-to-last chapter of Revelation, John is treated to a vision of the new heaven and the new earth and the city of God, and he reports that: [he] "saw no temple in the city, for its temple IS the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb." Here is hope that should drive every Christian every day in facing whatever and dealing with whatever: one day we will dwell securely and permanently in the glory of God. It will be as though we are pillars in his temple, and we will never go out of it.

D. The last assurance of Christ for this faithful church is that on those who conquer he will write the name of his God and the name of the city of his God, the New Jerusalem, and his own new name. That is, he will mark out those who conquer as belonging permanently and eternally to the Father and the Son and to this city. They are permanent citizens of the kingdom of God. It is how Paul closes Romans 8: "Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor height nor depth, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Listen, these assurances for those who conquer inspire us to hold fast to Christ. They inspire us to seek the things that are above where Christ is at the right hand of the throne of God. The glory that is to be revealed to us causes the sufferings of this present time to pale in comparison. Hoped for joy eclipses current sorrows and sufferings and temptations and groanings and hurts. We hope for what we do not see, but we wait patiently for it. We obey because we know something far, far inexpressibly greater awaits those who do.

Hoped-for glory is what moved Abraham to obey the Lord. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." Likewise, faith in Christ and his promises leads us to step out in obedience and to live as foreigners in tents now, suffering so to speak now, but knowing that the city that awaits us is greater in every respect and is itself not a temporal place to pause but our eternal home in which to dwell.

### **Conclusion**

Brothers and sisters, do not measure what really matters the way the world measures it. What makes it to the front cover of a magazine even a "Christian" magazine rarely reflects what really matters. According to Jesus what really matters is not what impresses the world but simply knowing and worshiping him, keeping his word, and refusing to deny his name. He assures those that do that they will forever belong to him and will bask in the beauty of his glory. Hold that close to your heart!

### **Prayer**

#### **Benediction**

Now to him who will keep us and make us a pillar in the temple of his God and write his name upon those who conquer, to him let us be faithful and keep his word and worship and serve him with hearts full of awe and love, blessed and fueled by his assurances of glory.

A-men.