

Letters To Seven Churches (Part Seven): Repentance

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The book of Revelation is known to be many things. It is a book of prophecy, a glimpse into the throne room of God, an unfolding of the horrors of the Day of the Lord, the most complete revealing of the activities of angels, a peek into the eternal age beyond the great White Throne Judgment. It is the story of the defeat of Satan and his demons, and of many, many other things besides. It contains dragons, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, battles, miracles, terrible plagues, heavenly trumpet blasts, millions dying to the right and to the left like flies, lions, leopards, bears, eagles, a lamb, a lamb dragon, a great harlot, the abyss, a huge city whose foundations are made of gemstones and whose gates are pearls, trees, the leaves of which heal the nations, and the coming of God the Father to rule planet earth.

It is easily the most gripping and continuous prophecy in Scripture. But it is also a book of doctrine. Not deep theology, for the most part. We do not have any long spiels by the apostle Paul trying to work all this theological complexity out, but it is real world Christian belief and practice. That is what the book of Revelation shows us, focused especially in times of great stress and danger. So everything is pared down to what is most important so that we can, in those times of great stress and danger, maintain our faith and move forward and endure to the end.

This kind of doctrine is what we see Christ expounding in the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, and the message is very simple. Come out of the world, focus with zeal on Christ and His way, overcome sin, with a special emphasis on overcoming idolatry and syncretism with the world. And, of course, as I mentioned a moment ago, endure to the end. We can see most of these in Christ's admonition to the Laodiceans in chapter 3, and I would like to go there right now. I know in the series that I am running on letters to the seven churches, of which this sermon and the one on the last day of Unleavened Bread will be a part, but here we are going to take a sneak peek into the letter to the Laodicean church.

Revelation 3:18-20 [Christ's counsel to that church. He says] "I 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. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, 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."

The counsel He gives is for us to buy. To use our resources, use our time and our efforts, and what have you, to buy these certain things: the gold, the white garments, and the eye salve. Gold mostly symbolizes character in this context and it is character purified by removing sin, which is what the Days of Unleavened Bread are all about. The white garments represent righteousness and victory, also emphasizing overcoming sin and living righteously before God. Eye salve stands for spiritual discernment and wisdom, that is, being able to see with the eyes of Christ through the Holy Spirit, being able to really understand the reality of life as it is at the time and what needs to be done.

They—the gold, the white garments, and the eye salve—all point to a renewed walk with Christ from and through whom all these things come. We can only purchase these things from Him. The gold, the

white garments, and the eye salve only come from God, and so we need to have a relationship with Him so that we can make this transaction and buy these things.

He says in verse 19 that He rebukes and chastens those He loves, and the reason He does this, it might not seem nice, but He is more interested in the end product. And so He does this to get us or the Laodiceans or whoever is taking this counsel to heart, for that person to come to their senses, put on zeal, get excited about Christ, get excited about the future that He has laid out for us, get excited about having strong, godly character, get excited about serving others, and repent.

Then He goes on in verse 20 to talk about living intimately with Him. That is the picture that comes out of this verse, where He is standing at the door and knocking. We have to with *zeal* get up and open that door and say, "Christ, come on in and let's eat, let's have a meal, let's talk, let's have a relationship here."—which is a picture of the peace offering where God and man and the High Priest, Jesus Christ, are all relating to one another and at peace.

One thing I barely mentioned so far about the book of Revelation (I have mentioned it a couple times), but it is really going to be the focus of the sermon. And that is that more than any other book in the New Testament (this is kind of an astounding fact), it is a book about repentance. To me, that is surprising. But looking at what it is talking about, repentance is a necessary part of what the church has to go through right there at the end.

The verb form of the word, *metanoeo*, is used twelve times in Revelation. Eight of those times are to the seven churches. That is what He is really pounding out to them, that they need to repent. Just to compare how much this is a book of repentance compared to other books, this word *metanoeo* is found in Matthew five times, Mark only three times, Luke nine times, which is the most other than Revelation. In Acts it is found five times and only one time in I Corinthians and that is in chapter 12, verse 21. So Revelation has twelve compared to the most of any other book, Luke at nine.

But it gets mentioned a lot. That is significant. It tells us a major theme of the book, and it tells me that during the crisis at the close of the age, true Christians are a rather sorry and uncommitted lot. Most of them still carry a great deal of sin around with them, and Christ is urging them to get rid of it and turn around and go the other way and put on character, the character that He has. Seems like the people of the church at the end time still have one foot *firmly* planted in the world. They seem to be hedging their bets, trying to make it easier to live in this world by being as worldly as they can while still maintaining membership in the church of God. Playing both sides, seeing how it will all come out, not willing to give their all to one or to the other.

They are typical of the proverbial "they want their cake and eat it, too." They want the best of both worlds, and Christ tells us unmistakably in the book of Revelation that the church of God at that time needs to repent—and fast! It is not fun hearing that sort of thing, but we have to think about it and realize that it is probably true. That we would really prefer to have the best of both worlds, and we are not truly committed to either side. That especially comes out in the letter to the Laodiceans.

This is the first day of Unleavened Bread, a festival that we have come to understand to depict this very thing, putting sin out of our lives and replacing it with godly living. That is repentance in a nutshell. That is making a change, making a turn from going one way, turning completely around and going the other. A change of mind, a change of heart, which comes out in time as change of behavior, change of speech, change of just our total way of life. So today we are going to look at repentance with special emphasis on Christ's call for the church to repent in the letters to the seven churches.

Now, if we believe that we are living in the end time, if we think that Christ's return is right around the corner, right over the horizon, as Loren said in the prayer, we are waiting for God to tell Jesus Christ, "Go ahead, return to earth as King of kings and Lord of lords," we think it is close, and if we do, then we better back up our words, our thoughts, with action and repent.

Please go with me back to the book of Exodus. We are going to touch bases as we always do with the command to keep this feast in Exodus. This is actually the first time that God commands Israel to keep the Days of Unleavened Bread, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Exodus 12:15-20 "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day, you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. [I want you to note that, just keep it in the back of your mind for what comes later in the sermon.] On the first day there shall be a holy convocation, and on the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation for you. No manner of work shall be done on them; but that which everyone must eat—that only maybe prepared by you. So you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this same day I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a native of the land. [It is mentioned again.] You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread."

Now we realize that the the weight of his instruction about this feast deals with eating and not eating leaven, a symbol of corruption or that which puffs up our bread, an image of pride and sin of all sorts. We understand that eating represents ingesting, or even digesting or infusing into ourselves outside influences. Something comes from outside we take it in. These things could be experiences that we go through, knowledge that we glean from a speaker or a book or what have you, the morality that is around in the culture and in the family—other people's examples that we see throughout our daily lives. Entertainments that we partake of, and whatever else. They go on and on, it is everything that we take in from outside.

We eat that, in the biblical terminology. It goes into us and then we assimilate it, and either we reject it or we take it in to our long-term life. It becomes part of us, and soon it becomes part of our character. But there is a place there between the time that it comes in and the time that we either rejected or we accept it, where we have to make choices and decisions. God wants our choices to be always in line with Him, with His way, and if they are, then we will be further unleavened, we will be putting on Jesus Christ.

So each year in the Days of Unleavened Bread, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, God makes us go through the exercise of removing leaven from our homes, our cars, the places where we have control. And then after that is all removed, we have to eat unleavened bread for seven days, and any time we eat bread, we were are eating unleavened bread. We are getting a taste, if you will, of what it is like to eat, or to live, put it that way, the way God lives. That is what we are supposed to be concentrating here on in this Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is taking the time and being zealous, to really focus on doing what is right, thinking what is right, thinking like Jesus Christ, turning that picture of unleavened bread into reality in our lives. That is, that we put on Jesus Christ.

Now this exercise that we go through in putting the leaven out and eating unleavened bread during the whole seven days of the feast, is done so that we experience, in a very simplified way—what is more simple than eating bread?—what *effort* that it takes—the *work* that it takes, the *toil* that it takes, the *labor* that it takes, the *commitment* that it takes—to change from sinner to saint. It is something that we have to put our minds to. We have to get down in the dirt and clean up the mess, we have to throw it out, and then we have to replace it with something much, much better.

Is that not basically what repentance is all about? It is making that change, that vast swing from ungodliness to godliness. It is a turning of the mind, first of all, and then a turning of the heart, as it were, and a turning of the entire character of a person. It is a transformation from something that is bad, worldly, ungodly to something that is good and acceptable to Jesus Christ and God the Father. We must be *changed*. We must be *transformed* to go from carnal to the image of Jesus Christ. It is not abracadabra, just a flip of a switch. It is something that must be done in a process over time.

And so we have the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It gives us that understanding that this thing is going to take a while. It is not just a one day thing, and it is over. This is something that must be continuous.

Please go with me to I Corinthians 5, and we will see Paul's take on this in a New Testament setting. We are going to read verses 6-8. Remember that he makes these comments after the terrible sin of sexual immorality that was occurring in the Corinthian church, where he says there in verse 1 that a man has his father's wife. So this is his response to that as the spring holy days are coming up.

I Corinthians 5:6-8 [He says] Your glorying is not good. [Because they were proud that they were allowing this to happen. They were being tolerant. They were in their minds were showing God's love to this couple and Paul has the exact opposite reaction.]. Do you know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The apostle Paul tells us a great deal in these three verses, and I am just going to give you four points here that he brings out.

First of all, he says, even a little bit of leaven corrupts the whole. This is evident not just in a person, but in a whole congregation as happened here in Corinth. It was beginning to spread and cause sin throughout the entire congregation, just as one sin in a person will corrupt the whole person. So one thing we can take from this is that we cannot let even what we might call little sins linger, because over time, even those little sins can wreak havoc. They can really do great damage to our character. So we have to be thorough in purging out those sins.

And that is the second point. He says we have to *purge* sin from ourselves. Purge is a very interesting word, if you will, because what it does here, it tells us just how much effort it is going to take. When you try to purge something, let us say a stain from a garment or whatever, it takes a lot of effort. It might have set in, and you are going to have to work on that garment and work on that garment, and rub it and use soap and whatever it takes to get that stain out. So the idea behind using this verb purge here, is that the wording evokes the ideas of not only concentrated effort, a lot of work, but also *thoroughness* and *completeness*. It is not just a quick washing and you are done. This is something

that is going to take a lot of *effort*, a lot of *concentration*, and a lot of *work* to get the stain completely gone. It is something that you are going to have to really put your mind and body into doing.

The third point here. Yes, Jesus Christ has already done the heavy lifting for us. Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. That sacrifice cleansed us from all sin. But that did not end our *sinfulness* because we still sin after taking the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to purge our sins and accepting Him as our Savior. There is still more that must be done. There is still a lot of sin in us because of our nature, because of the character that we have built up to this point still needs refined. And so He has done a great deal of the work. We could go before Him and His Father and ask for forgiveness, and we will be forgiven of our sins. But that does not mean that those sinful habits have been just torn out of us. We still have to deal with them. We still have to overcome them. We still have to repent of those things and go the right way. So Christ has, yes, done the heavy lifting. But there is still a great deal of work that we must do to *maintain* the righteousness that has been given to us.

The fourth thing that Paul says here, is that we must clean out both sins of thinking and sins of doing, and replace them with sincerity and truth. The words here, malice and wickedness. Malice is like a heading for all the evils of the mind. Whereas wickedness tends to be the great heading for all the evils of deeds, evils of action, evil behaviors. He says here, by using these two words, we need to get rid of both what is inside and what comes out in our behaviors because of what is inside. So we need to scrub out thoughts that are evil and deeds that are evil, and replace them with sincerity and truth here, which I will say just in passing, stand for pure inner integrity and Christ-like living. They are the opposites of malice and wickedness. Sincerity has to do with our integrity in our minds, in our heads, the way we are inside. And even though we think of truth in terms of a mental thing, something we agree with, in this case, it is actually truth that is acted out, lived.

Those are the four things that we can see there in I Corinthians 5:6-8.

It is obvious from what is said throughout the Bible, but it comes through here, that we cannot remain as we are. "Take me, Lord, just as I am." That is not going to cut it. We have got to change. We have got to repent. We may have been forgiven and justified through the blood of Christ shed for us, but despite how awesome and wonderful that is to have been given that great gift from God, it is not enough. Why is it not enough? Because all that does is set us in a position to change or to transform our evil character into as close an approximation of Christ's own character that we can with, of course, the help of God through the Holy Spirit. What does it say in Philippians 2? I want to read what it says here so we can get the understanding of this. It says:

Philippians 2:12-13 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

It says here that we have to work out our salvation, but Christ will work *in* us to do it. So what we find here is that it is a cooperative effort to change us from the way we were when He called us into what He is. We purify ourselves, our hearts, our minds, our actions over time so that we will be like Him as much as is possible for a human being to be like Him.

Let me put it this way. Let us just imagine that Adolf Hitler was forgiven of sin and justified. He comes out of the water of baptism, clean of his past sins. But he is still Adolf Hitler, is he not? Just because Jesus Christ and God the Father have forgiven him and he has accepted Jesus Christ, he still

has got a lot of baggage, does he not? A lot of habits that he formed over his years in the flesh. Through his belief in initial repentance and baptism and receipt the Holy Spirit, even though all those things have occurred, he has barely nudged the Christometer toward the image of the Son of God. He is still way, way, way far away from the character of Jesus Christ and the new man.

As Herbert Armstrong so often said in our hearing, in many sermons, God cannot create holy righteous character by fiat. Even the angels have to choose and live the right way. Otherwise they would be automatons, they would be robots. They would have no intrinsic character of their own. It would just be a script, a computer program that they were going by, instinct, what have you. But character, godly, righteous, holy character must be built over a lifetime through a cooperative process of transformation until we reflect the character of our Savior. Like I said, Christ does most of the heavy lifting for us. But we have to go through this process with Him, cooperating with Him, doing what He asks us to do through all the commands of Scripture, so that we are like Him in the end.

In Christianity, there is no free ride, no free lunches. We must pay the price of carrying our cross. We must go through this process of repentance and overcoming sin and transforming into the image of Jesus Christ. It is a necessary thing, and it is a glorious thing because that is where it ends. It ends in glory.

Let us look at some of these repent verbs in the book of Revelation. Please go back with me to chapter 9 of Revelation. We are going to look at the four final usages of this word repent in the verb form, metaneo.

Revelation 9:13-16 Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind. Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them.

So a great army has been set upon the world here. Let us drop down to verse 18.

Revelation 9:18-21 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed—by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths. For their power is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents having heads, and with them they do harm. [Now concentrate here on verses 20 and 21.] But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear, nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Let us go to chapter 16 now. This was the six trumpet of the seven trumpet plagues. We are going now to the seven bowls or vials of God's wrath. We are going to read verses 8-11. This is the fourth and the fifth bowl.

Revelation 16:8-11 Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory. Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the

beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain. They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

With these two passages, we find the four final mentions of repentance, the verb repent in the book of Revelation. What they do is they make a very pointed warning to the seven churches, and to us as individuals, because they show in very graphic and grim, grisly detail what happens to those who do not repent. This is looking at it from the negative. God gives these terrible plagues, puts on them horrible circumstances. Many die. We saw one third dying there in the trumpet plagues and however many more die in all these other ones, and they still do not repent. They blaspheme God, they are gnawing at their tongues in pain and they are still crying out blasphemies against the God of heaven. They do not repent!

What he is saying here is, for those who do not repent, they will end up facing and suffering the full force of the Day of the Lord. If you do not repent—this is the warning to the seven churches—you are going to face the terrible time of God's wrath because the call to repent is meant to be that thing that gets us going so that we can avoid this! So that we can be like Christ and to be safe in Him. God is not above scaring us into changing our ways. He will dangle us over the literal hell on earth, if it is necessary, to get us to wake up, to take notice, and begin the process of repentance.

Yet some people are so stubborn, so calloused, so rebellious, and anti-God, that even the prophecies, the promise of these horrible plagues, and even the actuality of these horrible plagues—war, scorching, darkness, pain, whatever it is—will not motivate them to repent. That is incredible! They talk about "there are no atheists in foxholes," but this proves the lie here. Maybe they are not atheists, but they are definitely anti-God, and they shake their fists at Him and they blaspheme Him because of these terrible plagues, when He is actually trying, in a way, to help them, to get them to change, even though they are under His wrath at the very moment.

But they refuse to change. They refuse to submit. Notice back in chapter 9, verses 20 and 21 what these hardened sinners refused to give up, what they are clinging to with such strength. He says they are clinging to the works of their hands, their own manmade, self-made gods that they can control, the ones they make, the idols that they make out of, it says here, gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood. But there are other gods that they hold on to that are not made of those materials, but are part of themselves, which they worship.

He also mentions here their worship of demons. They would rather worship demons than God, of course, because the demons let them do what they want to do. And then he mentions murder, clinging to murder, their ability to kill other people. Sorcery. This is an interesting word. It is the Greek word *pharmacon*. It is the use of drugs, mostly in magic. At least that is what the Greek term is connected with, drugs used in magic potions and such. But are not drugs a huge thing, a huge factor in people's lives these days? They want to hold on to their drugs. Sexual immorality and theft are also mentioned there.

Now what these two verses do, verse 20 first and then verse 21, is they set up a cause and effect situation. Their idolatry and their worship of demons, which are mentioned in verse 20, produces murder, sorcery, immorality, and theft. That is the cause and the effect. The real cause, the real thing that they have to root out, is their idolatry and their worship of demons. And if they would do that, they would actually go a long way toward getting rid of these other things—the murder, the sorcery, the sexual immorality, and theft.

But it points very clearly to the root of their problem. That is, their failure to recognize and submit to the true God. That is their problem. It is a lot like Romans 1. For even though they know that God is out there and His invisible attributes are clearly seen in all of nature and the things that He has done and the way history has progressed. But they simply will not believe. They suppress that knowledge and unrighteousness, and they go ahead and they continue to worship created things, idols, and go their own way.

That is what they refused to do. They refused to acknowledge God and to submit to Him, and this is why they cannot repent. This is why they are stuck where they are and will not change. It goes back to the idolatry that they are committing, the many, many idolatries in their lives.

Let us go back to Zephaniah 1 and get an Old Testament glimpse of the Day of the Lord. The first chapter right after Habakkuk, right before Haggai. We will read verses 14 all the way down to chapter two, verse three. But I just want you to get the feeling here for the day of the Lord.

Zephaniah 1:14-18 The great day of the Lord is near; it is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day of the Lord is bitter; there the mighty men shall cry out. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. "I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord [Does this not sound very much like what he is talking about there in Revelation 9:16?]; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse." Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of His jealousy, for He will make speedy riddance of all those who dwell in the land.

Now to us:

Zephaniah 2:1-3 Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, *before* the decree is issued, *before* the day passes like chaff, *before* the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, *before* the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you! Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, you have who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger. (emphasis ours)

This is the gist of Christ's calls in Revelation to repent. This is why He is doing it. He wants to save us from His wrath. He wants to save *everybody* from His wrath. But He especially wants those in the church to wake up so they do not have to go through that to get them to repent. The time of God's judgment is near, it is coming at us *fast*. How many times do we say that life just seems to be speeding by? Our repentance, our complete repentance, must happen before the death and devastation that is just over the horizon. Now is the time to seek the Lord, to seek righteousness, which is right doing. Seek God and do what is right, He is telling us. If we do that, it gives us a much better chance to avoid what is coming.

But notice the urgency in these two passages in Zephaniah. There is no time to delay. It needs to happen now. Get on it immediately, he is saying, because time is short.

Five of the seven churches in the letters to the seven churches, all but Smyrna and Philadelphia, are admonished to repent. Some quite severely are given their marching orders to repent. There is an indication that something is very wrong in the church that five out of the seven churches are told to repent. The rot is deeply rooted in some of these, and it needs to be purged, as the apostle Paul said. Christ is so urgent about getting it out because it is not something that can be cleaned up or cleared up in just a jiffy. It is not going to be something quick.

Repentance and transformation into the image of Jesus Christ is a process that takes time. It requires deep introspection and self-examination, which we have been doing as a prelude to this festival. It takes deep insight and discernment into ourselves and also into the character of Jesus Christ so we can see the comparison, or the contrast, as it may be. It takes deep humility to say, "I'm wrong and I don't measure up." It takes deep submission to the will of God and deep sacrifice to make those changes.

And do you know what else it costs or what else it takes? Pain. That is one of the things that really keeps us from changing—pain. Not necessarily physical pain. There may be some of that, but it is the mental pain, the emotional pain of changing ourselves that is so hard sometimes. Because we have to go up against our human nature that is fighting tooth and nail to remain our go-to way of life, and we have got to purge that. We can say it is like being stretched and then turned inside out. It is a complete reversal of thought, word, and deed, and there is even a way we can think of it as a kind of slow suicide. It may seem strange to think of it that way, but it is killing those parts of you that do not conform to Christ's image.

Paul talks about this in Colossians 3:5-11. I will not go there, but he uses the term *mortifying* the flesh, putting to death our members that are sinning against God. When you put something to death, there is always pain. It is always hard. It is always a struggle, but that is what we have to do to ourselves. That is why I said, it is kind of a slow suicide. It is a the death of our nature and replacing it with the nature of Jesus Christ.

Let us quickly go through these five churches in the letters to the seven churches that are told to repent. We will see what Jesus is telling them to do. And I hope by giving you these examples that you will see what you may need to do as you see yourself in these churches. We will just take these in order as they appear.

Revelation 2:4-5 [Jesus says to the Ephesian church:] "Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent."

The Ephesian church has been stout and very effective against false teaching and false teachers. But in all their battling against the enemies of Christ, they themselves had become hardened. Oh, they were valiant against threats, problems from the outside. But they were lazy and cowardly against those threats from the inside, within themselves, which indicates a level of self-righteousness within them. They thought that they were Christian warriors that could go out and hold off the encroachments from the world. But yet they themselves were allowing themselves to stay in a corrupt state in some cases.

Worst of all, they had lost their devoted relationship with Christ. That is the whole reason for their zealous crusade was to defend Christ and defend the doctrine. But they had forgotten Him in all their battling. So they had to get rid of their spirit of enmity, which was basically what was driving them and had overtaken their character. And they had to remember love. First of all, for God, for Jesus Christ, and then for their neighbors, their brethren. So Jesus tells them to do the first works, do the things that you did at the beginning, when you were zealous and you were really trying to make changes. Do the primary works. The basic works of love for brethren, of service, of kindness. Because the whole congregation was at risk. He said he would take their lampstand out of its place if they did not make these changes.

So that is Ephesus. They had to soften their hearts and become more like Christ in that way, and do those basic things once again.

We will skip over Smyrna because Christ does not tell them to repent. They were doing alright, even though they were going through hard times.

Revelation 2:14-16 "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."

Now the Pergamenes lived in a terrible situation, right where Satan had great influence. It says twice that Satan's throne or Satan dwells among them. But they had held fast, even under certain amounts of persecution. But, what He says here in verses 14 and 15 about the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitan heresy, is that they were allowing outside influences to make inroads among them, particularly in terms of doctrines that compromised with God's law, false doctrines that were designed to entrap God's people into sin, particularly the sins of idolatry and sexual immorality. We went through all this about the influence of the Roman religion and the guilds and all those sorts of things that asked them or made them do certain things that were against God's way.

Now these beliefs that were coming into the Pergamene church syncretized the truth with compromises that made it easier for them to live in the world. That was the problem. They were compromising so that their daily life among the other people of Pergamos was easier. Notice that the sins that are affecting them (it also affects Thyatira and Sardis, although it is not shown as much in chapter 3 with Sardis), are plaguing them, are named as idolatry and sexual immorality. These were some of the same sins that we saw in chapter 9, verses 20 and 21 that the people who were going through the Day of the Lord were not willing to let go of, especially the idolatry, and it led to the sexual sins.

These are sins, just like all other sins, but these are primary sins that can lead to being caught up in God's wrath, especially the idolatry, and of course, sexual immorality or fornication is just a type of of the idolatry. This is why Jesus is so concerned about what is happening in Pergamos because they needed to nip these things in the bud. If they did not, they would grow. They would fester, they would get worse, and they could very well end up among those people in chapter 9. So He is saying, "Let's repent of these things now before they get any worse, while they are still weak within you." You do not want to allow those things, those ways of life, to become any more entrenched in the

church than they already are. Jude 3 says that they needed to "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered," and the people of Pergamos certainly should have taken that counsel to heart.

Let us go down to verse 20 here in Revelation 2, and we will look at the Thyatirans problem.

Revelation 2:20-25 "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and beguile My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. [There it is again, the same two sins.] I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death [probably a disease of some sort], and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. Now to you I say, and to the rest [or remnant] in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden."

Now, what we can tell from this is that Thyatira's problem was the Pergamene problem, but, as I like to say, on steroids. It was much worse than the Pergamene problem. It had gone at least one step farther in Thyatira than in Pergamos. This is a church into which the false doctrines that we saw there had not only been introduced like they had in Pergamos, but had made a home. And they were being openly taught by this beguiling prophetess whom He names Jezebel.

Did you notice that Jesus does not tell this church to repent? But He tells the remnant who have not been deceived to hold fast. Now, He wants this remnant to keep on growing, of course. You know that goes without saying. But they have gone so far down the road that He does not even tell them to repent anymore. He says here that He gave Jezebel and her ilk time to repent, and they had refused! Notice what it says there in verse 21. "I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent." The majority Greek text of this verse translated into English reads, "And I gave her time to repent and she does not *want* to repent of her sexual immorality." That is a little twist on it. They loved what they were doing wrong. They enjoyed their sin. And like those people in chapter 9, they refused to repent. She did not want to. She was happy with the way they were going.

Verse 22 still holds out some hope of repentance; that some will go through a great deal to get to the point that they will repent. But notice that Jesus implies that only disease and great tribulation will wake them up. And perhaps not. Their big problem is, as I said, sexual immorality. But we must remember that fornication is often a metaphor for idolatry. If nothing else, Christ is telling them that their sexual sins are products of their idolatry. And their idol, in this case, is probably themselves and their baser urges. They want their flesh titillated, satisfied, as it were. But what it comes down to is that they will not deny themselves the pleasure. Something to think about.

Revelation 3:2-3 [He tells them, this dead church] "Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember 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."

If you will recall my last sermon, which was on this church here, I said that the Sardians may be the worst church of all since Christ's judgment of them is that they are mostly dead. (Reminds me of Wesley in *The Princess Bride*. He was mostly dead. He was just about ready to die, but they were

able to revive him.) These Sardians were almost totally reverted to unconversion. They had gone almost totally the other way. They are, as He says there in verse 2, ready to die spiritually. They are comatose. They are on life support, they are inert, no signs of life. Christ cannot see a spark of Christian living in them because they are more interested in being accepted by the world.

They were mostly worldly already. They were like all the unconverted people around them, and He tells them that they need to wake up. They need to remember all the effort made by people in the past, servants of God to provide the truth to them, and then follow that example and join in the work of God in serving the brethren, in witnessing God's way of life to the world through their words and action. They had to come out of this fear of theirs that they were going to be seen as different from the world, and He tells them, "You need to act like Me in the world," which would be very hard for these kinds of people. Their repentance lies in actively engaging in the Christian walk and Christian fight. They were trying to sit on the sidelines. They were trying to let everything kind of pass them by so they would not be noticed. Their works were dead and they were dying. And He says, "Nah, get up, do what is right. Do what I would do in the world." That would be very hard for such people.

Now we will get a preview of the Laodiceans.

Revelation 3:17-20 "Because 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—I 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. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, 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."

We know a great deal about the Laodiceans and their problems. Most of the church tends to believe that we were all Laodiceans, that we are in a time of Laodicean dominance, and that many of us have these traits. But to put it simply, the Laodiceans' problem is their tragically flawed self-evaluation. They think they are well and good and that they are standing righteously before God and Christ. Yet Christ judges them as spiritually destitute, naked, blind to their problems, unrighteous. That is why He counsels them to buy these things—the gold, the white garments, and the eye salve—because they need to work on their character. They need to work on their righteous behavior. They need to work on their spiritual discernment and to be able to make good judgments, right judgments.

Kind of like the Sardians, they need to get out of their comfort zone, and put some *zealous effort* into transforming into the image of Christ. Oh, they were busy. They were out and about doing all kinds of things, making money here, there, and everywhere. But they were spending their time, not with Christ, but with their desires, with their goals. That is why He tells them they need to get back to an intimate relationship with Him, because that is the only way that they are going to be able to have the righteous character that they need for the time that is coming.

The bottom line is they needed to invite Christ into their lives and spend some quality time with Him. Because they are so self-satisfied and self-absorbed, they have hitherto essentially ignored Him.

There is the five churches that are told to repent. Did you see yourself in any of them? I hope so. And I hope it makes a difference as you move forward in your life.

I want to end with this exhortation from the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5 and we are going to read the first 14 verses.

Ephesians 5:1-14 [He writes] Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore, do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), proving what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore, He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear!