

Almost everyone who has a job will, on occasion, have a conversation with someone they work with about their job performance. Sometimes it's their boss sitting down and having an annual review, sometimes it's 360-degree feedback from everyone on their team, sometimes it's a conversation with HR, but usually, on a semi-regular basis, employees get feedback about how they are doing, areas of strength that should be celebrated, and areas of weakness that need improvement. Sometimes employees are offered certain incentives that are performance-improvement based. Quick show of hands: how many of you enjoy these kinds of reviews for feedback? How many of you strongly dislike them? Even though not everyone enjoys these conversations, we all know how important they can be and that almost always something very valuable can be gleaned from them. That's the sort of discussion we enter today. But the evaluative conversation is not with a boss or an HR director; it's with Jesus himself. We get to overhear Jesus talk to four churches about how they are really doing. Revelation tells us that this is the Jesus who has eyes like blazing fire, the one who sees and knows everything. He is the one who sits down with each church and speaks directly into their situation—either for commendation, critique, or both. We said that the word **revelation** comes from the Greek word **apocalypse** which means **to pull back the curtain**. What we've seen so far is that Revelation pulls back the curtain for us to better see what's happening in the spiritual realms, Revelation pulls back the curtain so we can see into heaven and better understand the identity of Jesus, and today, Revelation pulls back the curtain on us, and helps us to see not the reflection in the mirror, but what Jesus sees when he looks at us.

Last week Emerson looked at Jesus' words to the first three churches [view the online sermon to see a map of the churches], and we saw that there was both solidary (Jesus connected with the churches and commended them) and scrutiny (Jesus offered critique and called them to repentance). This week, we look at the final four churches. The letters are written in the order of the mail man who would have taken this letter to each of them. As we listen in to what Jesus had to say to these churches, we will find so much relevance for what Jesus wants to say to us today, too.

Let's dive in and look at the first letter, to the church in Thyatira [view the online sermon to see a photo of the ruins of Thyatira]. Let me tell you some of the background of this city. Thyatira was not a very large city. It had the smallest population of all the cities Jesus addressed, but it had a very robust economy—tons of trade happened in Thyatira—but in order for the people in the city to participate in the marketplace, they had to engage in the worship of the local deities. It was a pay-to-play system in which you not only had to bring sacrifices to the local temples, but sometimes you even had to engage in promiscuity with the cult prostitutes. It appears someone in the church was telling the Christians that because everyone else was doing it, and because it was part of the culture, it wasn't a big deal, and it was okay for them to do it as well. Jesus spoke right into the heart of that situation and said,

I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. (Revelation 2:21-23)

The very situation they were facing as a church—the temptation to compromise their faithful devotion to Jesus by engaging with the temple worship and immortality—Jesus addressed head on. He said, “You tolerate that woman Jezebel.” Some of you are familiar with Jezebel from the Old Testament. She was married to King Ahab. Do you remember what Jezebel did? She silenced the voice of the faithful prophets and led God's people into worshipping idols. Jesus told the church at Thyatira that they had a Jezebel in their midst, one like the Jezebel who led God's people astray long ago. There was either an individual or a

group of people in the church who were teaching people it was okay to participate in idolatry, to cozy up in bed with the corrupt parts of culture, to compromise their character and still be in right standing with God. But Jesus said, “No!” “So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways” (Revelation 2:22). Like the Jezebel of the Old Testament was severely punished for her evil, this person who was acting like her would be punished as well, along with anyone who got in bed with her. “Those who sleep with Jezebel have a 100% infection rate” (Doug Welch).

This is such a practical and specific word for anyone of us who is crossing a line that we know we should not cross, and yet we’ve convinced ourselves for one reason or another that it is okay. Even as I am speaking, right now, if this is relevant for you, you know that area in your life where you have compromised your Christian character, where you have crossed lines you knew in your bones you should not cross. Whatever you think you are going to gain by compromising your Christian character, it’s not real. It’s a mirage. It’s actually faithfulness to Jesus, fidelity to him and him alone, that results not only in the life we want today, but in the life we hope for tomorrow. Listen to the promise that Jesus gave those in Thyatira:

To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give that one the morning star. (Revelation 2:26-28)

This promise to have authority over the nations would have rung in their ears. Thyatira was a city situated on a plain. They had no mountains or fortified walls to protect them. Every time war broke out in the region, they were the first and easiest city to conquer. Historically speaking, their city had traded hands again and again from one nation to another. They were perpetually vulnerable and insecure. But Jesus says to them, “If you are faithful, if you will hold on, if you don’t compromise your character, bow down to the idols, or get in bed with Jezebel, rather than the nations ruling over you, I will give you authority over the nations. You will reign with me.” What a promise! What’s the Thyatira takeaway? Compromising our Christian character always comes with consequences. Only Christ can provide the life we truly desire.

Next, Jesus spoke to the church in Sardis [view the online sermon to see this city on a map]. Sardis was a very fascinating city. The opposite of Thyatira, a city built on a plain that was constantly exposed to threats, Sardis was built on the top of a cliff, with a 1500-foot rock-face on three sides, and a very steep slope on the south side that connected it to a nearby mountain range. Because of their location, the people of Sardis prided themselves in their city being impregnable. Sardis was a very wealthy community. In the 6th century BC, they were the first people in history to learn how to separate gold from silver. Metallurgy made them unbelievably wealthy, and Sardis became the first city in the world with a mint to produce gold and silver coins. This was a city with a sterling reputation—a reputation for military might and for financial prosperity. These were people who thought they were awesome. But when Jesus spoke to them, he didn’t say anything nice. He didn’t give them a single word of encouragement. Rather, he said to them: “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God” (Revelation 3:1-2). Jesus told these people that although they took a lot of pride in their reputation, a lot of pride in what other people thought about them based on who they were in the past, that didn’t mean anything at all to him. He knew their deeds, and he said, “You are dead.”

This speaks right to so many of us today who, spiritually speaking, rely upon the reputation we have based on something that is adjacent to us, like the family we were born into or a commitment we made to God a long time ago. As a pastor I can tell you, oftentimes when people think about their relationship with

God, they think they get a little extra credit because of the faith of their parents or grandparents, or they get a little extra credit because when they were in high school they had a really cool religious experience, or because they did a really sacrificial good deed ten years ago. When God looks at the state of your heart, he is not focused on your family, your friends, or your past; he is looking at who you are today.

Now listen to what Jesus said to the church in this city: “Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you” (Revelation 3:3). Jesus said they needed to wake up, and if they didn’t, he would come to them, and they would not now know at what time. This would have had a very precise and personal meaning for them. Do you remember where they were located, high on top of a hill? They presumed their city was unassailable to the enemy since they had such a strategic location. But twice in their history, in 546 BC at the hands of Cyrus and again in 214 BC at the hands of Antiochus III, at night, a lone enemy soldier scaled the cliffs to the city, and when the watchman wasn’t paying attention, he climbed the walls and opened the gate, and their entire city was destroyed. Because of that, this was a town that vowed to stay vigilant, to always keep watch. Jesus said, “Forget keeping watch for the Persians, for the Greeks, or for any other army who might come when you aren’t paying attention. You need to be prepared for me to come when you aren’t ready, because I am the one every person who has ever lived is going to have to give an account to.” To those who were faithful, Jesus gave this promise: “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white” (Revelation 3:4-5a). White robes indicate not only purity, but victory; this is what soldiers would wear after successful military campaigns. He continued, “I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels” (Revelation 3:5b). Jesus said they would be protected not by a cliff on three sides, but by him. He would call their name before his Father on that last day and give them eternal life. What a promise. What’s the Sardis take away? The only way to find true, eternal security is to humble ourselves before God and place our faith in Jesus Christ. Confidence cannot come in our reputation, our past, our family, or our good deeds; it comes by placing our faith in Jesus and looking to him for our righteousness and protection.

Next Jesus speaks to the church in Philadelphia. This was the most recently built city Jesus spoke to, as it was founded in the second century BC by Attalus in honor of his brother. That is why it is called the city of brotherly love. But when this letter was written, this city was not getting any love. Philadelphia was the Napa Valley of the Roman Empire. Their volcanic soil produced the best wine in all the Mediterranean. But in 92 AD, three years before this letter was written, the emperor ordered over half of their vineyards cut down to bolster the price of Italian wine and to force them to grow more corn for Roman soldiers. Their economy went from 100 MPH to 0 overnight. This city had become severely impoverished. They weren’t enduring only economic pressure; there was intense persecution going on as well. Even though everyone in the Roman Empire had to worship the emperor, the Jews were given a very special exemption because of how much respect Julius Caesar himself had for Judaism. When Julius Caesar found out the Jewish faith went back 2,000 years from his time and predated the founding of the Roman Empire, he gave them an exemption from praying to Rome and the Roman emperor; they could pray to their God on behalf of Rome. Julius Caesar said, “Don’t pray to me, but pray for me. Don’t worship me, but worship your God and ask his favor on me.” They were the only religion in the world he gave that allowance to. Because most of the early Christians felt at home in the Jewish synagogue, the Christians were usually kept safe from persecution. But as time went on, it became clear: the Christians not only believed in Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, they also worshipped Jesus and believed that he was the Messiah, God’s Son. The Jews didn’t like that, so they kicked the Christians out of the synagogue, which not only meant they didn’t have a place to worship, it also meant they no longer had the religious protection of the Jewish community. It meant they were now exposed to intense persecution from Rome.

With that background listen to what Jesus said to them: “These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut” (Revelation 3:7-8). Jesus said, “The synagogue might kick you out of their space, but I can open a door for you that no one will be able to shut. You will always be welcome in the family of God.” In addition, Jesus said he was going to bring about some vindication: “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you” (Revelation 3:9). How’s that for making things right? These people had been through so much. Jesus didn’t offer them any critique. He didn’t tell them they needed to make any changes. Listen to what he said instead: “I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown” (Revelation 3:11).

I know there are a lot of people here today who have been going through so much hardship and heartache. You are at the end of your rope. The last thing you need is someone to tell you to try a little harder, to do more. You need to hear Jesus give you this promise: I am coming soon, just hold on, hold on tight, so you don’t lose your reward! What’s the Philadelphia take away? To the faithful who are suffering, Jesus sees you, he is filled with compassion toward you, and he will rush to your side. You are not alone; he is with you, and he is mighty to save.

This message to the church in Philadelphia tells us Jesus is gentle with us when he knows we are struggling, but the next letter to the church in Laodicea reminds us that Jesus is direct and confrontational with us when he knows we are proud or passionless in our faith. If you look at Laodicea’s location on the map, you’ll see a very interesting aspect of their geography. The city had no water supply. They were in a tight alliance with Heliopolis to the north (which was known around the area for its medicinal hot water springs) and with Colossae to the east (which was surrounded by snowcapped peaks and had a constant flow of ice cold, purified drinking water). But because Laodicea had no water supply, without refrigeration all the water they drank was tepid, room temperature. Jesus said to them, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16). Jesus did not appreciate the quality of their faith. He said their faith was so unpalatable to him that he was about to vomit them up. Can you imagine Jesus saying that to you about your faith? Why do you think Jesus had that sort of response to them? If we keep on reading, I think we’ll see why.

“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing’” (Revelation 3:17a). We know some facts not only about the water supply of the city, but about the money supply as well. Laodicea was the banking capital of the entire region, so there was more money flowing into and out of this city than any other town nearby. With their wealth and success came arrogance. They had a special breed of sheep that produced the best wool in the empire, which made them stylish and even wealthier. And they had a school of medicine in Laodicea that manufactured an eye cream that helped cure ophthalmological diseases, which also brought in the money! They got so arrogant, so stuck up, so self-confident that they stopped depending on God. They looked at their plush bank accounts and thought they were rich enough to provide for themselves. Jesus had a wake-up message for them: “You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see” (Revelation 3:17b-18). Jesus said, “You are confident in your wealth because you have a bank. In reality, you are bankrupt. Come to me to find pure gold so that you can actually become rich. You are strutting around like peacocks in your garments because you have the best wool around. In reality, you are exposed and naked. Come to me to find white clothes to wear. You think you are hot stuff because of your patent on your eye cream. In reality, you are blind as a bat. Come to me to find a salve so you can see.” Everything they took pride in, literally every single area in which they boasted, Jesus said, “You are fools. You got it all wrong. But if you humble yourselves, if you turn from

your arrogant spirit and instead have a contrite and broken spirit, I will give you all you need and more!” This is the famous passage in which Jesus said: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3:20). This is what Jesus wants from all of us, to open the door and let him in. What is the Laodicea take away? Jesus despises pride and spiritual apathy and implores us to take pride in him and in him alone.

For every one of these churches, Jesus gave a very different and very specific review. For some it was encouragement and rebuke, for one it was basically all bad, for another it was basically all good, for the last church, it was basically, if you don’t make a change, you are fired. But if you come to me and make a change, your future is brighter than you could possibly imagine.

Now I want us to think about Jesus having that conversation not with someone else, not with another church 2,000 years ago, but with us, today. What would Jesus say to us, to you? His eyes are like blazing fire; he sees right into the truth of the matter. His heart is filled with gentleness to those who are hurting and need compassion. At the same time, his heart is filled jealous zeal for those who have become distracted by other priorities and need to be called back to their first love. The key question I want us all to be mindful of is this: Jesus is speaking to us—will we have ears to listen? He’s not offering us a raise or a bonus or a promotion if we do what he says; he is offering us eternal life. Let’s respond.