



John Kass, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, recently wrote about a waiter named Bouch who works at a tavern in Chicago. Bouch is from Morocco and he decided to write to the King of his homeland. The King is very popular because he often interacts with his subjects in public. He's freed political prisoners; he helps the poor and disabled. When Bouch wrote to him from Chicago, the King, true to nature, wrote back.

"Look at the letters," said Bouch. "These are letters from the King. If I meet him, I'll be so happy."

Kass writes, "How many guys hauling beer and burgers in a Chicago tavern have a correspondence going with a royal monarch?"

He talked to Morocco's deputy counsel general in Chicago and was told it isn't unusual for the King to write personal letters to his subjects abroad. He said, "It happens a lot. He loves his subjects."

You think the King of Morocco loves his subjects? You ought to meet Jesus, the King of Kings, and read his precious letters to the church.

Today, as we come to Revelation 2 and 3 we're looking at seven of those letters. Last week we saw how the book of Revelation is one big letter written to the church of John's day. Within this big letter are seven smaller letters written to specific churches in Asia Minor. The number 7 is a symbolic number. It points to completion or perfection. These seven churches are meant to be representative of the universal church throughout the ages. These letters are for all churches of all times.

In chapter 1 John told us about his vision of the exalted and glorified Jesus. One of the outstanding things about this vision is Jesus is pictured as standing in the middle of seven lampstands. In v.20 Jesus says these lampstands represent the church. Why do you think Jesus uses lampstands to symbolize the church? Because that's what we're called to be in the world. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." The church's calling is to be in the world, shining as a bright light pointing people to the love of God and the truth of the Gospel. And really, as we'll see, that's what lies behind everything he says in these letters to the churches. They lived in a dark world, and so do we. But we're called to be different. We're called to shine. And everything Jesus writes here is meant to serve that purpose.

The Pattern

Introduction

We're not going to read all seven of the letters, but each of them follows the same pattern. First, there is an introduction to the letter where Jesus announces who the letter is for and who it's from. Each letter is addressed to the angel of each church, which might be a real angel or it could be a messenger or leader of that church. In describing who the letter is from, some aspect of John's vision of Jesus is highlighted. It's a reminder that before we need anything else we need a fresh vision of who Jesus is; if we take away Jesus; if we lose sight of him. When a church has an identity crisis it's because we've lost sight of Jesus.

Commendation

After the introduction comes a commendation. In each letter Jesus says, "*I know this about you...*" and he mentions something about them that's worthy of praise. The only exception is the last letter written to Laodicea. In every other case, Jesus finds something good about the church. Jesus affirms us. In my family, when someone has a birthday, they have to sit and listen as each person affirms them for something. In a weird way, it can be hard to listen to praise. But Jesus tells us what we're doing right. The church can be a glorious place. Lives are transformed. People show immense faith in the midst of terrible odds. Sacrifices are made. Jesus sees he affirms us. He says, "I know how you're honoring your parents. I know how you're standing for me at your job. I know how you're holding out for my best when it comes to a husband or wife. I know the missionaries you support. I know how you serve me. I affirm you." Does your Jesus affirm you? Being in a church means standing there and feeling the warmth of embarrassment on your face as he tells you what you are doing right.

Correction

But he doesn't end there. After he commends them, he also goes on to correct them. Again, there are exceptions. Two churches receive no words of correction: Smyrna and Philadelphia. But all the rest have to listen while their weaknesses and failings are exposed. The church can also be a distressing place. The fleas come with the dog; the bugs come with the light. And Jesus is not a wimp. He's not afraid to point the finger. Over and over he says, "*I have this against you...*" He threatens the church at Ephesus with the possibility of losing their lampstand (2:5). He warns the

church at Laodicea he is about to vomit them out of his mouth (3:16). Five out of seven of these churches are called to repent for something. Repentance is not just for the unbeliever; repentance is for the church. It's not just for a few individuals within the church; it's for the whole church. We need to listen to his correction.

Call and Promise

Finally each letter closes with a call to listen and a promise to the ones who overcome. The promise comes under a variety of images. Ephesus is promised a tree of life, Smyrna a crown of life, Pergamum is promised a white stone and a new name written on that stone, Thyatira is promised the morning star, Sardis is promised white garments, Philadelphia is promised they will become a pillar in the Temple of God, and Laodicea is told they will sit down with him on the throne. Sometimes we think that the promise of reward is a kind of lesser motivation. We think the good we do is less if we are motivated to do it by the promise of reward. Shouldn't we want to do good just because it's good? Jesus isn't worried about that. He says, "I've got something wonderful waiting for you."

But these promises are always conditional; they're only given to the ones who overcome. In 2:7 he says *"To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life."* Each letter has a call to overcome, to conquer. We're called to be conquerors. It's for conquerors the promise of eternal life is held out. This may surprise you. I thought we're saved by his work, not our own? Indeed, Christ is the ultimate conquerer. He said in John 16:33, *"I have overcome (conquered) the world."* Through the cross and resurrection, he conquered sin, death and the devil. So if we conquer it's only because he's conquered. But if we don't conquer, how real is our faith? The call to conquer is a call to faithfulness, perseverance and a commitment to put him about all earthly things. Then and only then will he shine.

Each of these letters follow this fourfold pattern, yet what Jesus says to each is different. Just like people have personalities, churches have personalities. As we read these letters, ask yourself, what's our personality? What about us might Jesus commend? What would he correct? What special promise would he give us? What do we have to overcome?

The Problems

As a matter of fact, let's take a look at what these churches would have to overcome. If we look at these letters as a whole, there are three problems or challenges they have to face, and they're no different than what we have to face.

The problem of persecution

First of all, there is the problem of persecution. We talked about this last week. This is why John is on the island of Patmos. But this was a problem in many cities. Look at the second letter to

the church at Smyrna. He says, *"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"* (2:9). So the persecution in this case was from ethnic Jews. John says they're Jews in name only because true sons of Abraham put their faith in Christ. But things are going to get worse for these believers in Smyrna before they get better.

He says in the next verse, *"Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days."* This is the problem of persecution. It's still a problem today. More people died for their faith in the 20th century than ever before. We don't believe it because we don't see it here in America as much. But this is still a very real issue for many of our brothers and sisters around the world. We live in a unique place in a little window of time where it's acceptable to be a Christian. But how long will this last? We have to be prepared for a time when standing for Christ will mean losing our jobs, our friends, our freedoms and even our lives. It's interesting that the only two churches that don't get rebuked are Smyrna and Philadelphia, and they're the two suffering the most persecution. You see, persecution has a way of refining us.

The problem of compromise

Second, there's the problem of compromise. You see this especially in the third and fourth letters. The third one is to the church in Pergamum. Jesus calls it *"Satan's throne"* (2:13). This city was built around a hill that rose 1,000 feet above the plains. At the summit was an acropolis with a massive altar to Zeus. The city also had a temple to the Emperor Augustus and a shrine to Asclepius, the god of healing. After he commends them he says in v.14, *"But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality."* Balaam was a false prophet who had seduced Israel into worshipping false gods and fornicating with foreign women. This wasn't a flattering nickname. This false teacher encouraged people in the church to compromise with both idolatry and immorality.

You see the same thing in the next letter to Thyatira. Jesus says in v.20, *"You tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols."* Thyatira was known for its trade guilds. It would have been hard to make a living without being a part of one. But these guilds often practiced idolatrous rites at their luncheons. Believers would have been put in a tough spot. Go with the flow or possibly lose your job. A woman in the church John calls Jezebel was saying "Go for it. You have to make a living, don't you? God understands. No big deal." That's the problem of compromise.

May I ask, where are you compromising? In what areas are you caving into the thinking and the values of the world around you? George Barna has been surveying American evangelicals to see if we practice what we preach. He says that evangelicals divorce at about the same rate as the nation at large. Only 9% of evangelicals tithe. Of 12,000 teenagers who took the pledge to wait for marriage, 80% had sex outside marriage in the next seven years. 26% of traditional evangelicals don't think premarital sex is wrong. That's all about compromise.

The problem of complacency

The third problem these churches faced was complacency. Not all the churches in John's day were suffering persecution. Like us, many of them faced an equally dangerous problem. Consider the church at Sardis. He says to them in 3:1, ***"I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."*** I call this the overrated church. It had a name; a reputation for being alive. There's lots going on. But Jesus says in reality they're dead. Later he tells them their ***"deeds are not completed in the sight of God."*** They're like people who thought they'd finished a race; they're kicking back, but they still have a few miles to go. He tells them to "wake up." They had fallen asleep in the middle of the race! Sardis was the perfect model of lackadaisical Christianity.

The same problem is seen in the final letter to Laodicea. He says to them, ***"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth."*** No doubt Jesus is referring to the local water supply. The nearby town of Hieropolis was famous for its hot springs. All the water that came by aqueduct to Laodicea was lukewarm by the time of its arrival. Nobody likes lukewarm water. You want to spit it out. What does it mean to be spiritually lukewarm? We get a hint down in v.17. Jesus says, ***"...you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."*** This isn't a persecuted church; this is an affluent church. This church has it all. They were outwardly successful but inwardly shallow and proud. They were content in the worst possible way. They were self sufficient; they didn't feel like they needed anything. This is why we should thank God for whatever trials we have in our lives. Trials humble us. They drive us to our knees. They wake us up. The very thing you pray to get rid of may be keeping you from spiritual apathy.

These are three things we must overcome. Let's face it, right now our church doesn't face much persecution. It's the other two problems we have to watch out for. How do we overcome compromise with the values and lifestyle of the world? How do we overcome complacency and apathy and pride that comes with affluence and comfortability?

The Purpose

Each letter tells us how. Each gives a kind of remedy; a spiritual antidote for the particular problem they faced.

Faithfulness

The first thing is faithfulness. He says to the persecuted church at Smyrna, ***"Be faithful unto death"*** (2:10). He says to the church at Pergamum, ***"you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells"*** (2:13). Fifty years later, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, demonstrated this faithfulness. Since he wouldn't worship the emperor, they arrested him on the charge of atheism. Polycarp was urged to change his mind: "What harm is there in saying Lord Caesar?" He remained firm to the end; his final words as he faced the crowd in the stadium were, "86 years have I served Him, and He never did me injury: how then can I blaspheme my king and my Savior?" That's faithfulness.

Love

The second thing is love. This is what Jesus says the church at Ephesus lacked. They were real solid in their beliefs and they wouldn't tolerate false teaching. That's good. We should be careful about what is taught here. We care about truth. But he goes on to say they've left their first love. So he says, ***"Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first."*** It's like when a couple has been married awhile and little by little they begin to drift towards just going through the motions. They used to spend time together and do little things for one another just because they were so in love, but not now. Everything now is done out of duty. Jesus says go back and do the things that characterized your first love for Jesus. Remember when you just loved to spend time with him? You talked about him to everyone who would listen (and a few who wouldn't). I had this old VW van when I became a Christian and the first thing I did was put a "Honk if you love Jesus" sticker on it. And we honked! And when I saw someone with a fish sticker I tried to get their attention so I could give them the one-way sign! At Christmas I bought every person in my family a Bible. I don't do that anymore. It's possible in the Christian life for us to become so wrapped up in going through the motions of Christianity and believing the right things that all the warmth and all the passion and all the spontaneity is gone. Remember what Paul said, ***"If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."*** (1 Cor. 13:2). Love for Jesus and love for his people is the most important thing; keep the fire of love for Jesus and his people burning in your heart.

Holiness

The third thing is holiness. This is emphasized the most in the letter to Thyatira. Along side their love and faith and service, they tolerated the teaching of a woman nicknamed Jezebel who led God's people into immorality. Jesus says to them, *"And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds"* (3:21-22). Jesus cares about holiness and purity. We're his bride. We're preparing for a wedding. In a sense, we're saving ourselves for him. So whatever it is that leads you into immorality, repent of it and deal with it. Get someone to hold you accountable. It may be websites, romance novels, sleazy magazines or just TV. Someone said, "TV is an invention that permits you to be entertained in your living room by people you wouldn't have in your house." Maybe we should think about that next time we're watching something we'd never allow in our home.

Alertness

The fourth thing is alertness. We saw in the case of Sardis that they thought they were alive but they were dead. They had a name but they were overrated. So they were in a spiritual slumber. Jesus says to them, *"Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent."* (3:2-3). He gives five commands in machine gun fashion: wake up, strengthen, remember, keep, and repent. Waking up was doubly relevant to Sardis. The word means "to remain awake because of the need to continue alert." Twice in the history of Sardis, this city had fallen because her ruler had failed to be alert and place watchmen on the battlements. The church was making the same mistake. Its activity, its reputation for life, had lulled it into a false sense of security. So they need to wake up. There is still work to be done. Jesus calls the church to strengthen what remains. The church was not totally dead. There is still a dying ember which can be fanned into flame. How? By remembering, keeping and repenting. We're to remember who we are, keep the words of Jesus, and repent of our self-sufficiency.

Wholehearted zeal

Finally, the last thing we need is wholehearted zeal. He says to the lukewarm church at Laodicea, *"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, 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 will dine with him, and he with Me" (3:19-20). It's hard to summarize this with one term, but I think it points above all to the need for wholehearted zeal in our walk with God. If we don't show this, Jesus will end up locked out of the church. Do you see that? This isn't Jesus knocking on the door of an unbeliever's heart waiting to be let in. This is Jesus standing outside the church which is full of lukewarm, half-hearted believers. They're playing church but he's not there! He says, "Will you let me in? Will you repent of your self sufficiency? Will you show some zeal?"

If any athlete was known for zeal and focus it was Michael Jordan. One night Jordan was getting ready to go out. When he asked if he could borrow a jacket from a friend, he found his friend's closet was filled with both Nike and Puma products. The Nike outfits had been given to him because of his relationship with Jordan, who had a lucrative contract with the company. The Puma outfits had been given to him because of his relationship with another basketball player who represented Puma. Jordan walked into the living room, laid all the Puma gear on the floor, and went into the kitchen to grab a butcher knife. When he returned to the living room, he cut all of the Puma clothes to shreds. He then picked up the scraps and carried everything to the dumpster. Once Jordan came back inside, he turned to his friend and said, "Don't ever let me see you in anything other than Nike. You can't ride the fence!"

That's zeal. If he can be that zealous for sweatpants, why can't we be for our Savior? Maybe there is something in your life you need to get rid of; tear it to shreds; take it to the dumpster and throw it out!

Conclusion

We have letters from our King. He knows us. He knows our situation. He knows we face challenges: persecution, compromise, complacency. But our King calls us to overcome. He promises those who overcome will be blessed with eternal life. He tells us how we can overcome:

Be faithful unto death.

Return to your first love.

Pursue holiness.

Wake up from your slumber and be alert.

Be zealous and repent.

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