

UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part three

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SPIRITUAL LIFE DESTROYERS THAT INVADE CHRIST'S CHURCH

We saw last week that these great *"church chapters"* - chapters two and three of Revelation - are introduced with a picture of Jesus Christ walking among the *"lampstands,"* which represent the presence of the church in this world.

The message is immediately apparent: *These churches are meant to cast light into the darkness of this troubled, soon to be judged world.* We have nothing else to do but *walk in the light* and *shine the light* of Jesus to the lost and dying.

Here's what you have in chapters two and three of Revelation: Sixty years after the birth of the Church, Jesus is walking among His lampstands - these local congregations. And the burden of His heart is that most of these churches aren't giving much light. Five out of the seven churches are not capable of doing what they were created to do. They don't shine. They're not radiating anything of the truth and love and light of Jesus Christ.

I see Jesus confronting *three spiritual life destroyers in His Church.* We're looking at these, not for the purpose of *historical interest,* but because these same *terminal viruses* effect the church in all ages. These seven local churches Jesus speaks to in Revelation 2 and 3 are only examples of what Jesus wants to do in *any* church - in *our* church.

Here are the *terminators* of spiritual life and light in the local church:

1) DANGER NUMBER ONE - THE SUBSTITUTION OF ACTIVITIES FOR PRIORITIES

Listen to these words: **Revelation 2:2-3** - "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. [3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary."

There is no mistaking the diligence of this church at Ephesus in certain areas. They had *works* to back up their *words.* They were *busy* in ministry (*"I know your works"*). They were *disciplined* in the things they did. They weren't quitters (*"I know your endurance - you have not grown weary"*). They were *concerned about doctrinal purity* (*"you have tested those who call themselves apostles, and are not..."*).

None of these accomplishments is insignificant. These are all important ingredients to any sound New Testament congregation. No church would want to stand before Jesus having been careless about any of these areas of responsibility.

But here's the important point: *Not one of these accomplishments can sustain relationship with Jesus by itself.* And that's what Jesus is dealing with as He walks among the lampstands - these precious local congregations. He's reminding them of the things that are *crucial,* but easily *taken for granted.*

Great works alone don't guarantee living spiritual life. Sound doctrine is vitally important. No good church should ignore teaching. But sound doctrine *alone* won't insure passionate spiritual life. It only *lays the foundation* for understanding and knowledge. It *opens the door* for spiritual life, but doesn't *guarantee* it.

This becomes even more obvious when you look at Jesus' words to another congregation - the church at *Sardis* - **Revelation 3:1-2** - "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. [2] Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.'"

"I know your works. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." Don't miss the significance of those words. Deeds only have meaning - spiritual significance - transforming power - when they come from a heart that is alive with love for Jesus Himself. Without this attachment to the Lord, deeds will not be found *"complete"* (3:2) in the sight of God.

Jesus feels the need to tell these two churches something they aren't seeing. A church can have *"deeds"* and still be *"dead."* If Jesus didn't say so, we wouldn't believe it. Our world measures *everything* by works. And works *are* important. We'll see that as we continue through the other points of today's teaching. But, while works are *important,* they are not *enough.*

That's what this first danger is all about - the substituting of *activities* for *priorities*. Just as this can happen on a *corporate* level in the life of a church, it can happen on an individual level as well: **Matthew 7:22-23** - "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' [23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Jesus tells us that, on judgment day - which we'll examine from this book of Revelation in a few weeks - one of the primary sources of confusion and consternation will be in people who have interpreted their *activity* for Jesus as *relationship* with Jesus. People will come to Jesus only to discover that *activity* was not the same as *intimacy*. *Ministry* was not a substitute for *relationship*.

Jesus exposes this deadly virus that can infect careless congregations - the tendency to *go through the motions*. We've all seen how deadly this can be in various settings. You've probably known couples who have had their marriage fall apart gradually because, perhaps for years, they allowed themselves to "*go through the motions*" of a once deeply loving relationship. Businesses fall apart when the passion that drove them to greatness turns into a deadly, cold plateau of machinery.

"Let him who has ears *hear* what the Spirit is saying to the churches!" Never *forget* or *forsake* Jesus' call to answer to your *first* priority. Never lose *touch* with Jesus.

2) **DANGER NUMBER TWO - THE TOLERATION OF SEXUAL IMPURITY**

Again, Jesus deals with this issue in two of these local churches - the church at *Pergamum*, and the church at *Thyatira*: **Revelation 2:14, 20-22** - "But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality....2:20-22....But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. [21] I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. [22] Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works...."

Of course, there are other sins dealt with in these two churches, but the sin of *immorality* and the *church's tolerance* of immorality are the sins repeated in *both* of these congregations. Specifically, two individuals are mentioned as being *linked* with the careless attitude these two churches were developing: *Balaam* (2:14), and *Jezebel* (2:20).

It's interesting that we never get away from the mind-set of *Balaam* in the Bible. His actual story is found in the Old Testament book of **Numbers**, and his name is still mentioned in the last book of the Bible, **Revelation**. What is so significant about Balaam? Many of you will know his story from **Number 25**.

Balaam was a man who seemed to have a genuine prophetic ministry at some point. But he liked to live in *two worlds at the same time*. The King of Moab tried to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. But God wouldn't let Balaam do this. When Balaam found he couldn't *curse* the Israelites he decided to *corrupt* them instead. He probably tried to convince them that, *because they were God's covenant people, God would never judge them for their sin*. That lie has been working well for centuries.

He set up feasts at Baal-Peor where the men of Israel would come and fall into sin with the daughters of Moab. As a result, God slew 24,000 Israelites. Balaam himself was also slain, and the account of his death is in **Numbers 31:8**. Balaam had requested to die the death of the righteous, but that request was never granted.

Balaam has constantly infected the church. There are all sorts of people who want to *die* righteous who don't want to *live* righteous. They want the blessing of God and the help of God. They want God to answer their prayers. They want to go to heaven when they die. But they don't really want to *live* for God. That's the spirit of Balaam. And it's alive and well in the church today.

Balaam and Jezebel both led the people of God into sexual immorality. And they both tried to *justify* their sexual wickedness. That's the danger Jesus was pinpointing in these two New Testament churches. People who want to commit sexual sin *in the church* will always find some extenuating circumstance, some special dispensation of grace from God,

some way of *continuing* in something that will never fit into the Christian life.

I can't tell you the number of times I have counseled people in my office who, not only were involved in areas of sexual permissiveness that were clearly inappropriate, but were convinced that they had some special license from God to *indulge* those areas of sin with the ongoing blessing of His grace and presence in their lives. ***It can never happen!***

God is calling His church - our church - away from immorality. He will never partner Himself with it. You can't indulge in immorality on television or the internet and then feel consistent and clean when you come before the Lord in worship. You're destroying your soul. And Jesus will never tolerate your sexual indulgence or indiscretion.

3) **DANGER NUMBER THREE - THE FALLACY THAT OUTWARD SUCCESS IS SYNONYMOUS WITH THE BLESSING OF GOD**

Again, you can see this in two different references - and in two very different sets of circumstances:

Revelation 2:9 - "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

Revelation 3:17 - "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

How ironic! In one case the people said they were *poor* and Jesus said they were actually *rich*. In the other case the people said they were *rich* and Jesus said they were actually *poor*. In truth, the same mistake was being made in both situations. In each case the people were measuring their *inward spiritual condition* by their *outward circumstances*. This is always a dangerous business.

The first mistake is probably slightly less dangerous than the second. But there is still a lesson to be learned. Never interpret the difficult times in your life as proof that you are spiritually dead or unloved and unnoticed by Father God.

How many of us do this! We beat ourselves up because we are going through a season of illness, so we convince ourselves we must not have enough faith. We find our children reaching the age where they make their own decisions, many of which don't please us, and we convince ourselves we were terrible parents. We go through a time of persecution for our faith and then allow the spirit of the age to convince us we're somehow intolerant, unloving people. When trials come ***keep yourselves in the love of God.*** Keep your heart pure and ***keep yourselves in the love of God.***

The situation at the church at *Laodicea* is more serious - **Revelation 3:17-18** - "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. [18] I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see."

Notice, these people need help to *see* properly. They just don't get it. They have everything but a sense of *need*. They've filled their lives up so full they don't have any *hunger for God*. They have no sense of their own *miserableness*.

I talk to people like that all the time - right here in this church. There are people who have been empty of God for so long they don't even know what it is they're restless for anymore. But nothing in this world is satisfying their heart.

That's where these beautiful words of invitation come in: **Revelation 3:20** - "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." We usually link these words with the unsaved, but this is simply not the case. These are *church* words. They're written to people like us if they were written to anyone on earth. They're written to people who have made room for everything else in their heart but Jesus.

We're going to be looking at an expansion for our church building in the near future. But I'll tell you this for sure: The whole board, as we've looked at this until our eyes were sore, has no dream or goal just to have a bigger or fancier church plant. The only thing that counts is Jesus. We want to reach more people with His love and grace. Outward size and success is no *measurement*, and certainly no *substitute* for spiritual life.

For all these fatal flaws Jesus calls his church to ***deep and thorough repentance***. These terminators of life will never just run their course - like a cold or flu - through our systems. They must be ***forsaken*** and ***removed***. Only 66 years after Pentecost, in five out of seven letters Jesus calls His church - not the world - to ***repentance***. Are we sometimes better at calling the sinner ***outside*** the church to repentance than we are at ***repenting ourselves?***