

The State of the Church  
Revelation 2-3  
10/5/2014

I am going to start this sermon with an illustration from Steve Wilmhurst's commentary on Revelation. Imagine that you are in a doctor's office. This doctor is one of the best specialists in the field that is related to your current sickness. You are waiting to hear the prognosis. You are a little nervous, because you are a bit afraid that the news will not be good. You know that maybe you haven't exercised as much as you should have. At the same time, you have some confidence, because this doctor is the best there is. The doctor walks into the room. He sits down, leans across the desk, and says, "Well, I have some good news and some bad news." Now let's just stop right there. What do you do? Some people (quite silly people), might say, "Right, thanks very much, it has been nice knowing you!" and rush out of the room. This person might justify rushing out of the room by thinking that it is perhaps better not to know. The person goes home and hopes for the best. Most people, however, would stay to hear what the doctor said. They would want to know everything about the state of their physical health. The problem, of course, is that people are not nearly as eager to learn about the state of their spiritual health, even though it is more important than physical health. Here, the best spiritual Doctor of all time, Jesus Christ Himself, is going to diagnose and prescribe remedies for the state of the church. The question we need to ask ourselves at the moment is this: how badly do we want to know about our spiritual health, and how badly do we want spiritual health? With a church as healthy as Lebanon is in many ways, it might not be a comfortable thing to hear Jesus saying to us, "You're doing this well over here, but I have this against you..." What would Jesus say to Lebanon Presbyterian Church if He came walking through the door? That is the question we ask when we come to the seven letters addressed to seven different churches in what is now known as Turkey. We must listen to His voice. That is the main message and application from considering all of these letters together: we must listen to the voice of our Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

There are several things I want us to notice about these letters. The first thing is that all the letters are addressed to all the churches, even though

there is also one message per church. This is clear in the text itself, since the ending of each letter has the following very important statement: “Hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Not just one church. Churches. Each letter is addressed to all seven. There is no indication that these letters were originally sent individually to each church. Instead, each of the seven churches would have read all seven letters. That is a very helpful indication for us that these seven letters are, in fact, relevant to the church of all ages, and therefore relevant to us.

Another important application for us arising from this point is that, just as the original recipients of the letters saw themselves as part of the larger church, so must we. Our ministry cannot be isolated to just our local community, even if the majority of our time is spent in our local community. There is the global church to consider. We cannot be selfish with our time and resources.

The order of these letters follows the normal order of a postal carrier. He starts from Patmos, an island just off the west coast of Turkey. The first city he will come to is Ephesus. Then, travelling in a clockwise direction, he visits all the other churches. You can see this on the map that is printed in your bulletin.

The next thing to notice is that these “letters” are really more like prophetic messages. The OT prophets were sent to the people of God primarily to do two things: encourage the believers among the Israelites, and warn the disobedient about God's coming judgment. These letters do the exact same thing. There is an encouragement for those who believe, and are doing something correctly. There is also a warning for those who are missing something. It is important to remember that here, unlike the illustration of the doctor's office with which we opened the sermon, the Heavenly Physician of the soul loves us more than any doctor could. He loves all seven of the churches, even those with which He is most displeased.

Now we can look at the seven messages, and look at their format, and gain some helpful things from a general look at the letters. Each letter starts with the exhortation to write a letter to a particular church, followed by a description of the Son of Man that comes straight out of the vision that John had in chapter 1. What is important about that description of Jesus is that it is faith in Jesus, and in particular that aspect of Jesus that is mentioned that will be the key for that particular church to get back on track. The most

obvious example in this regard is the letter to Philadelphia. The church there has little power. But they need to walk through the door that Jesus opens for them. That is why Jesus is described at the beginning of that letter as having the key of David. Jesus opens the door that the people need to enter.

The second element is that Jesus knows about that church. Five of the seven have something commendable about them, and that is always first listed. Also, five of them have some problem or other. Jesus knows it all, and He still loves that church. This is a great encouragement to us here at Lebanon. Jesus knows about Lebanon. He knows everything about Lebanon. He would probably say some encouraging things about our church, and then some things we need to work on. The point is that Jesus is in fact doing that to us through these seven letters. We will see that more clearly as we go through each letter.

The things that Jesus knows that are positive are doctrinal purity, love, patient endurance, work, faith, and service. Those are things He mentions. Are those things that are important to us? Remember, we need to love what Jesus loves and hate what Jesus hates.

Speaking of hating what Jesus hates, the things that Jesus mentions that are bad are divisible into two categories: doctrinal impurity, and moral impurity. Neither is more or less abominable to God. Unfortunately, we live today in an age where people like to choose one as being more of a problem than the other. Typically today, moral failings are generally seen as more of a problem than doctrinal failings. If a well-respected church leader goes off with the secretary and commits adultery, that is usually far more scandalous to most Christians than false teaching is. But the fact is that both are equally heinous in God's sight. After all, the one teaching false doctrine is misleading God's people, and leading them to Hell, as like as not. In the letters here, it was particularly the teachings of the Nicolaitans that Jesus hates. Jesus hates false teaching! We also therefore need to hate false teaching. It is uncertain, by the way, just exactly what the Nicolaitans taught, but it seems to be some form of syncretism. They thought that they could have their Christianity mix with the pagan religions of the day, and that nothing bad would come of it. That was being "broad-minded," no doubt!

The third element is that Jesus exhorts the churches to do something or hold on to something. There is work for the church to do, and Jesus is not going to do it for them. Instead, He encourages us and gives us what we

need to do those things.

The fourth element is the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Why is this here? Well, for one thing, not everyone has an ear to hear. Many people are not willing to listen to such diagnostics. They would rather just get a nice pat on the back, with some kind of trite saying that tomorrow's a new day. Do we have ears to hear things that are not always going to be comfortable to hear? We need ears like that, because God is always working on us through His Spirit.

The last element of each letter is a promise to the one who overcomes. Ultimately, the one who overcomes is Jesus Christ. However, by His grace, we can be more than conquerors as well. The promises are rich and glorious and find their fulfillment in the last part of the book of Revelation. Indeed, we can see a clear contrast between the church of the seven letters, and the church of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, beautifully dressed as a bride for her husband. The reason, then, that these letters are being given to the churches in Turkey, is so that they will start to become like the church at the end of the book. That is the goal. That is where we are headed. The diagnosis that Jesus has for us is good news and bad news. But what is good even about the bad news is that Jesus will help us to overcome. He will help us to become the church without fault, without blemish, as He washes us with the Word of God, and strengthens us with the Word and sacraments. We need to pray for our church that God will show us what we are doing that is good, so that we can be encouraged. We also need to pray that God will show us where we need to improve, so that we will also pray for those areas.