

The Church Militant

Revelation 2

The Church on earth is engaged in a war.

But only a portion of the Church is actively engaged in this war.

It is the portion that exists on earth.

Theologians call this the Church Militant.

There is another portion of the Church that exists in heaven. For them, the war is over. They are at rest.

When a Christian dies, his soul, being united to Christ, is made perfect and immediately goes into the presence of God. Theologians call this the Church Victorious.

The Church Militant and the Church Victorious are one and the same Church.

Depending on your vantage point, the one Church will look very different.

If you look at her from the earth, she looks war torn and ragged.

But if you look at her from heaven, she looks like an army on dress parade.

Revelation 2-3 give us a look at the Church Militant.

Revelation 4-5 will give us a look at the Church Victorious.

They are not two different churches. The Church Militant is currently united to the Church Victorious. At death Christians pass from the Church Militant to the Church Victorious.

Today, we are going to look at 4 of the 7 churches of the Church Militant.

Jesus uses these seven churches to define for us the nature of the war in which we are engaged.

These seven churches were chosen because they provide “real-life” examples of the types of attacks we all face as Christians.

Before we get into the specifics of these attacks upon the Church, I need to deal with another issue – that of being judged.

Christians love to judge other Christians. What I mean by “judge” here is to place another Christian in their proper place. Think of an orchestra. It is the responsibility of the conductor to place each member of the orchestra in their right chair. You may play the violin. But it is up to the director to determine if you are “first” chair or “fifth” chair. And everyone knows their place.

Christians love to think of themselves as the conductor. They want to decide who are Christians, and who are good Christians, and who qualify for “first chair”. And we do not only do this with individuals, we also do it with churches. And of course, we all want to think that we belong to a “first chair church” or at least a “second or third chair church”.

We must fight to restrain ourselves from acting as conductor. Why?

There are at least three good reasons.

First, we all have areas of weakness and sin. We may excel in one area but fall short in others. We may think of ourselves as first chair in one area, but the reality is that we may not even make the orchestra in another. The fact is that we are not in the position of being the conductor.

Second, we often make our judgments without knowing all the facts, and therefore judge wrongly. I have two oak trees in my yard. They were planted on the same day, 75 feet apart. Both are lovely oak trees. But one is two to three times larger than the other. My guess is that one tree was planted in better top soil, while the other was planted in ground where the top soil had been removed. It is also possible that the smaller tree took more of the brunt of the harsh weather as it was just a bit more upwind than the other. To tell you the truth, I have no idea why one is larger than the other. But if they were two Christians, or two Churches, the larger would surely feel justified in thinking itself better than the smaller.

Third, we do not judge from a motivation of true love. True love sincerely cares for the welfare of the other person when it points out some fault. It does not desire to place a person in their proper place, but rather genuinely wants them to thrive.

Before you say words of correction, ask yourself, “Do I really care to help this person? Or do I simply want to put them in their place?”

Because we have been judged by people and felt its stinging barbs, we react by not wanting to be judged by anyone. This overreaction is not helpful. We all have many ways in which we individually and corporately fall short of the glory of God. If we want to continue to move forward towards that glory, then we are going to need correction.

And there is no one more qualified to deliver that correction than the LORD Jesus Christ.

He Himself is perfect and so has the right to be our Judge.

He sees all and so always makes a right judgment.

He has proven the depths of His love for us by shedding His blood for us.

With perfect love and precision Jesus judges each of these churches.

But what I find even more amazing is that the Holy Spirit takes Jesus’ words to these seven churches and applies them to each of us as individuals and congregations.

The Holy Spirit knows how to apply these exhortations to your specific situation. As we go through these, ask the Holy Spirit to work in your heart. Willingly submit yourself to the loving scrutiny of your Lord and Savior.

And even more than scrutinizing you, Jesus and the Spirit want you to know the nature of the battle.

Think of yourself as being prepped by your commanding officer as to the various strategies of the enemy, the types of warfare used by him.

Let’s dig in and consider the struggle facing the Church at Ephesus.

Read Rev. 2:1-7.

You are an active church zealous for good works.
You are a hard-working church.
You are a church that patiently endures many trials.
You have kept a strong sense of holiness in your congregation.
You have even had the courage to stand up against false apostles who tried to creep in to the Church.
What is more is that you are a church with stamina. When many people are quitting the fight, you have pressed on.

What more could Christ want? Right?
I would expect to hear next, “Well done, my good and faithful servant!”

But instead, Jesus’ last evaluation comes down like a thunderbolt...

4 But
 I have this against you,
 that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Some translations read, “left your first love”.
What does it mean to “abandon the love you had at first”?

It means to no longer value and appreciate Jesus more than anything else in your life.

When a person first comes to know the Lord and His great love for them, there is a freshness... a zeal... a passion... that is sometimes overwhelming.

I think this initial love can be compared to the initial stirrings of romantic love. There is a season in which the couple is “walking on sunshine” or “living on love.” Nothing else seems to matter. But as time goes on, the feelings that once came effortlessly, now require work.

But if you hope to have a healthy marriage, you must fight against the sinful tendency to no longer value and appreciate your spouse as first in your life.

As a Christian, Jesus wants you to love Him above every other love. He wants you to enjoy His love for you above every other love. He wants you to dwell in His presence and crave His embrace.

“Good works and pure doctrine are not adequate substitutes for that rich relationship of mutual love shared by those who have experienced for the first time the redemptive love of God.” Mounce

No matter how much you “do” for God and for the Church, Jesus knows when your love for Him has grown cold. And He knows, that if something is not done to renew this love, it will surely wither and die, like a flower trampled underfoot.

What is the nature of the war in which you find yourself.
At its very heart is the battle to not lose your zealous love for the Lord and your delight in His love for you.

Jesus does not want you to “kinda” love Him. He wants to be first in your life.

What is the Spirit saying to you?
Have you abandoned your first love?

Jesus proves that He deeply cares for the Christians at Ephesus. He gives them a path forward.

5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen;
 repent,
 and
 do the works you did at first.
 If not,
 I will come to you
 and
 remove your lampstand from its place,
 unless you repent.

Jesus calls His people to remember their former zealous love.
He wants them to recall the times in their past where making sacrifices was easy.

I would add that in doing this, they must also recall what it was that filled their heart with love.

Mary did not wipe Jesus' feet with her tears out of the goodness of her own heart. She did it in response to the greatness of Jesus' love for her.

Our love to God is always the response of His love to us.

For some here today, you may wonder if you have every really "loved" Jesus. You assume that you "believe" in Jesus, but truth be told, you find Him boring and would rather do almost anything than be with Him.

Whether you once loved Jesus and have lost that love, or you have never really loved Jesus, the solution is the same: repent.

To repent is to admit that you are not currently loving Jesus as you ought. It is to seek His merciful forgiveness for not loving Him as He deserves. And it is to devote yourself to loving Him wholeheartedly, even while you know that if He does not work this love into your soul your efforts will be fruitless.

This sort of repentance must become a regular practice for each of us. Our love for Christ is like a battery that continually needs recharging.

What will happen if we ignore Jesus' call to repentance?
Jesus will come and remove our lampstand.

What does it mean to remove the church's lampstand?
It can only mean the death of the church.

The love of Christ for you, and your response of wholehearted love for him, is the fire that drives the Church. Lose that fire, and you will find that the church ceases to see new souls being saved. And eventually, the church will die.

It is not so much that Jesus is demanding perfection in our love for Christ. What He is saying is that this is a battle that must be fought. And to not fight it at all, is to abandon Jesus Christ.

6 Yet
 this you have:
 you hate the works of the Nicolaitans,

which I also hate.

We really do not know who the Nicolaitans are, except that they are bad. They come up again in vv. 14-16 and are in some way connected to the teaching of Balaam, a false prophet. They encouraged God's people to participate in false worship and to engage in various forms of immorality.

To hate what Jesus hates is a good thing.

7 He who has an ear,
 let him hear
 what the Spirit says to the churches.

Jesus said this often while He lived on the earth. It means to have a heart that is ready to listen.

Jesus says explicitly what I said earlier, "the Spirit will apply to the hearts of the members of all the churches, what Jesus has said to the Ephesians".

The Church is in a war. But it is not a typical war that we think of in this life. It is a war to love God wholeheartedly.

And so, Jesus finishes His word to the Ephesians in the language of war.

To the one who conquers
I will grant to eat of the tree of life,
which is in the paradise of God.'

You must fight to conquer your old sinful heart that hungers to love itself rather than God. To conquer does not mean to completely eradicate all sin now. Jesus has already demonstrated that repentance is part of the victory. To conquer is to stay in the fight and to remember that this really is the fight.

Philippians 3:12-14 ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The upward call of God in Christ Jesus is to love Him wholeheartedly. Do not content yourself with less.

What is the promise given to the one who conquers?

Jesus gives the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

The tree of life represents the fullness of all the joys of the eternal kingdom.

It was the fruit of another tree that Adam and Eve chose over God. They left their “first love” in order to partake of this fruit.

The Gospel reverses what was wrong in us after the Fall. The Gospel drives us to love God as our first love.

But once what was wrong in us has been fixed, God once again promises everything else that is good.

God does not really want us to lose everything else. He just wants to be first.

So, it makes perfect sense that those who fight to put Him above all else, will eventually be given everything else!

Matthew 6:33 ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The temptation to not love Jesus wholeheartedly is a central aspect of the nature of the war we are fighting. But it is far from the only one.

Smyrna represents the temptation to avoid tribulations, especially poverty and persecution.

Read Rev. 2:8-11.

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

Smyrna boasted as the first city to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius and to practice emperor worship.

Smyrna also had a large Jewish population which was hostile to Christians.

Because of this environment, the church in Smyrna was poor and underwent a greater degree of persecution than most.

Some years later, Polycarp was burned on a pyre here because of his refusal to worship Caesar.

9 'The words
 of the first and the last,
 who died and came to life.
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.

As Jesus speaks to those who are suffering and who are facing the fear of persecution and death, He reminds them of His own death, and subsequent resurrection.

And He also reminds them that He is the One who controls all of history.

It is important to see that the Christians in Smyrna were facing various levels of tribulation.

They were being slandered by unbelieving Jews.

They were poor as the result of being ostracized by the powerful elites in society.

They were experiencing other forms of tribulation associated with remaining loyal to Jesus.

Behind this tribulation was the hatred of Satan. We are not to think that Satan literally had his headquarters in Smyrna. But we are to see that Satan is behind the persecution and hatred of the Church.

Jesus has no rebuke for this church, only words of encouragement. But it may not be the encouragement that we want to hear.

Do not fear
 what you are about to suffer.
 Behold,
 the devil is about to throw some of you into prison,
 that you may be tested,
 and
 for ten days you will have tribulation.
 Be faithful unto death,
 and I will give you the crown of life.

What does Jesus prophesy concerning the church in Smyrna?

More suffering... "Wait! What?"

He doesn't tell them that he will take them out of the suffering.

He doesn't tell them to form an army to protect themselves from the suffering.

He doesn't call in reinforcements from the other churches to form an alliance of strength.

He doesn't even tell them to form a public relations committee to change the way the elites think about them.

He simply tells them "Do not fear."

Matthew 10:28 ²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

What is more is that Jesus promises that for some their suffering will not end until they die.

"Be faithful unto death."

In fact, He promises that the Devil would cast some of them into prison for ten days.

Ten days may not sound so bad. And only some will have to endure this test. We can hope it is not us.

But this is not the effect Jesus intends.

The 10 days are symbolic of a brief yet complete period of persecution, very likely ending in our death.

Where would Jesus get this idea of 10 days?
He would have gotten it from the book of Daniel.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were the OT heroes who faced persecution with courage.

And it just so happens that Daniel 1 speaks to us of their being tested 10 days.

Daniel 1:12-14 ¹² "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." ¹⁴ So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.

The reference to ten days reminds them of the courage of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were willing to be burned alive rather than bow to the pagan king.

Jesus wants us all to be faithful "unto death". And He promises to us all "The crown of life".

The crown of life is just another way of looking at the tree of life. They both represent our salvation.

The crown emphasizes the honor and royalty of those who were previously slandered and slain.

You don't have to be martyred to wear the crown of life. But you must fight the battle to not abandon your faith to avoid persecution.

¹¹ He who has an ear,
let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
The one who conquers will not be hurt
by the second death.'

Jesus finishes His encouragement, not by giving them a way out of martyrdom, but by saying that they will not have to endure the second death.

Jesus does not explain the second death until chapter 20, but it is not difficult to guess.

The second death is the eternal death of hell.

It really is a strange war that we fight. Jesus tells us that we conquer by remaining loyal to Him even as we are being put to death.

Don't live your life to avoid persecution.

You don't have to seek persecution. But neither should you compromise your loyalty to Christ in order to avoid it.

The next church, Pergamum, represents the temptation to become like the world in its religion and morality.

Pergamum was the center of worship for four of the most important pagan cults of the day: Zeus, Athena, Dionysos, and Asklepios.

In other words, the temptations of pleasure and idolatry were powerful here.

Read Rev. 2:12-17.

12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

'The words of him
who has the sharp two-edged sword.

13 "'I know where you dwell,
where Satan's throne is.

Yet
you hold fast my name,
and
you did not deny my faith
even in the days of Antipas
my faithful witness,
who was killed among you,
where Satan dwells.

14 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.

What would it be like to be told that you live “where Satan has his throne”?
Creepy.

Jesus might be referring to the altar of Zeus or even Asklepios.

Asklepios was symbolized by a serpent and was proclaimed to be the Savior.
Strangely enough, this symbol remains with us as the symbol of the medical
community.

It is also possible that Jesus is making reference to the Imperial Cult. Pergamum
was the official center for Emperor worship. (Augustus 29 BC – had a temple built
for himself while he was still living.)

Jesus does not have a problem with equating the religion or the government of
the city of Pergamum with Satan’s throne. This does not conflict with the reality
that Jesus is the one who truly wields the sword. God is the one who stands
above every earthly power and will bring them to judgment for their rebellion.

Satan is not omnipotent, nor omnipresent. There are some places where his
power is more focused.

Pergamum was such a place.

I would expect Jesus to say, “Get out of there!” “Run for the hills.”

Like what the angel said to Lot.

But this is not what he says.

The church in Pergamum had not denied the faith. They had remained faithful,
even in the days of Antipas.

Antipas was an early martyr, possibly during the reign of Domitian.

But everything is not perfect in Pergamum. What does Jesus have against them?
They have people in the church, possibly even teachers in the church, who hold to
the teaching of Balaam.

The story of Balaam is found in the Book of Numbers. He was not a prophet of Israel. But through his prophecies, God's people were influenced to chase after the pleasures of this world.

In other words, some in this Church had embraced some of the lies of the unbelieving world around them.

What church, what person, is not influenced by the lies of the culture around us?

And that little device which most of us carry is like a portal through which the lies of the world can flood into our minds if we are not careful.

We are in a battle for truth. We may stand strong against the lies of the world in 8 out of 10 areas. But in those other 2, we have succumbed to thinking like the world. The only way to fight against these lies is by immersing ourselves into the truth of God's Word.

Jesus' words to Pergamum greatly encourage me. Jesus knew that the struggle against the world was greater for them than in other places. He knew where they lived. That means that He also knows the powerful temptations that face us today.

Only Jesus knows the difficulty of our temptations. But rest assured, He does know.

Knowing the severity of the temptations does not give us a pass. We cannot play the victim card.

But it does help to know that Jesus understands and has compassion.

And it should drive us to ask Jesus for more grace.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil is a prayer that is good no matter how strong the evil.

John Newton wrote of something called "London grace". By that he meant grace that was perfectly fitted for the trials of living in London. Because he believed the evils of London were greater than in the country, he believed he needed an advanced degree of grace to live there. (The works of the Rev. John Newton 1:357)

Ask Jesus for the degree of grace that you need for the situation in which you find yourself. We need “2024 grace”.

15 So also
 you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.
16 Therefore
 repent.
 If not,
 I will come to you soon
 and
 war against them
 with the sword of my mouth.
17 He who has an ear,
 let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
 To the one who conquers
 I will give some of the hidden manna,
 and
 I will give him a white stone,
 with a new name written on the stone
 that no one knows
 except the one who receives it.'

In one sense it does not really matter how powerful are the forces around you.
The solution is always the same.

Repent of compromise.

Repent of believing the lies.

Cast yourself again on the mercy of God in Christ.

Cling to Him as the one who bears the sword, who speaks and worlds rise and fall,
who is the truth and who will crush all lies and deception and those who utter
them.

Conquering happens as we repent of lies and turn from our sin.

Jesus promises to those who conquer some of the hidden manna.

Manna symbolizes salvation.

It is manna because it represents the God’s provision for His people in the
wilderness.

It is hidden because a jar of this manna was hidden in the ark of the covenant. (Exodus 16:32-34).

It was a reminder of God's past provision, and it pointed them forward to the riches of the Promised Land.

Later, during the destruction of the temple, it is said that Jeremiah took this jar and hid it underground at Mt. Nebo. (2 Maccabees 2:4-7)

At the coming of the Messiah, it was believed Jeremiah would reappear and return the ark and its contents to the new messianic temple.

Ultimately, the manna depicts fellowship with Christ, which will be consummated at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

He will also receive the white/shining stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

This is probably not a reference to some secret name, but rather that you have the name of Christ, which is not known to the unbelieving world.

The nature of the war in which we fight is a war against the lies of the world. It is a war to not believe those lies. It is a war to not pursue the pleasures of the world as the source of our happiness.

1 John 2:15-17 ¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world- the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions- is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

If Pergamum represents our struggle against the evil of the world around us, Thyatira represents the struggle of the Church to not teach those same lies.

Thyatira represents the temptation of the Church to tolerate false doctrine (false prophesy).

Read Rev. 2:18-29.

¹⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write:
 'The words
 of the Son of God,

who has eyes like a flame of fire,
and
whose feet are like burnished bronze.

19 "I know
 your works,
 your love
 and
 faith
 and
 service
 and
 patient endurance,
 and
 that your latter works exceed the first.

20 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.

Jesus has many good things to say about Thyatira. It is very similar to Ephesus. But they are a church that is beginning to tolerate that woman, Jezebel.

The effect of Balaam and Jezebel are very similar. They both encourage idolatry and immorality.

What is different about them is that Balaam was an outside influence of the world and Jezebel was a voice inside the Church.

Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Sidon. But once she was married to King Ahab, she became a prophetess leading God's people astray from within. She also schemed to kill God's true prophets.

What is important to see is that there was not overt persecution here. The temptations were much more subtle. The voices were within the Church inciting Christians to live more like the world, sexual immorality standing at the head of all compromise.

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,
23 and
 I will strike her children dead.

Jezebel is encouraging God's people to commit spiritual adultery. Jesus will be patient, because she belongs to His church, at least outwardly. He gives her time to repent. It is good to remember this when we become frustrated that Jesus allows churches and denominations who have abandoned the Gospel and the Word of God to continue to exist. But when she does not repent, He will come in judgment upon her and those who follow her.

 And
 all the churches will know
 that I am he who searches mind and heart,
 and
 I will give to each of you as your works deserve.
24 But
 to the rest of you in Thyatira,
 who do not hold this teaching,
 who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan,
 to you I say,
 I do not lay on you any other burden.
25 Only
 hold fast what you have until I come.

The elders in this church are not perfect. They do fall short in many ways.

But it is our commitment to not altar the truth of the Gospel and to proclaim the truth of the Word of God.

We promote absolutely free grace. We believe that we will only enter heaven because the perfect righteousness of Christ is reckoned to us.

But we also want to be careful to never distort this grace as an excuse to live in sin.

Titus 2:11-13 ¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,

When a church begins to tolerate a form of grace that does not call people to repentance and a life of devotion, she has accepted a false gospel, one that resembles what Jezebel taught long ago.

Repentance is the only medicine, along with a renewed commitment to the truth. The nature of the war in which we find ourselves is a war to “hold onto the truth of the Gospel” until Jesus returns.

Conquering is maintaining sound doctrine which leads to holiness.

26 The one who conquers
 and
 who keeps my works
 until the end,
 to him I will give authority over the nations,
27 and
 he will rule them with a rod of iron,
 as when earthen pots are broken in pieces,
 even as I myself have received authority from
 my Father.
28 And
 I will give him the morning star.
29 He who has an ear,
 let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Jesus promises to give to the conquerors the morning star.

The morning star is Jesus Himself (Rev. 22:16).

This would be in contrast with the pagan understanding of the Morning Star. The planet Venus was a symbol of sovereignty in the ancient world, especially Rome. Roman emperors claimed to be descended from the goddess Venus, Roman generals built temples dedicated to the star, and it was a sign carried on the standards of the Roman legions.

Do not compromise with the world, and you will conquer.

What is the nature of our warfare?

1. Ephesus = the struggle to not lose your first love
2. Smyrna = the struggle to not compromise your faith to avoid poverty and slander and persecution.
3. Pergamum = the struggle to not succumb to the world's ideologies and lifestyle of immorality.
4. Thyatira = the struggle to not tolerate a false gospel that does not train us to fight against the sins of this world.

"The overcomers in Revelation are not those who have conquered an earthly foe by force, but those who have remained faithful to Christ to the very end. The victory they achieve is analogous to the victory of Christ on the cross." Mounce 72.

The battle can only be won by faith. Dr. Kelly says it well.

"Now what is it to be an overcomer? It is somebody who looks out of self, sin, weakness, and looks up to Christ, saying, 'Lord I trust in you and I give my life to you.' That is an overcomer... an overcomer says, 'It's not in me, Lord, to do right; I have broken the law; I am weak, I can't do right; so I am looking to Jesus to clean me up by his blood, and then to empower me to follow him with his own gracious resources.'" Kelly 52.

1 John 5:4 ⁴ For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world- our faith.