

What Jesus Is Looking For In The Church

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April 16-17, 2005

Revelation: Looking at Life From the Perspective of Heaven Series

Revelation 2:1-11

I was away doing some conferencing in England over this past week. Apparently, there were a number of rumors floating around when people heard that I was going to Europe. In fact, the Dispatch heard from some folks in the church that I was over in Europe attending the Pope's funeral. While that would have been a wonderful thing to do, I was not in Rome. As I said to a few of my friends, "They should have had the historic churches represented there – Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, alongside of the head of the Greek Orthodox Church, and right next to these two dignitaries, the third great non-Catholic historic stream of the church, the Vineyard!

I also was not at the wedding of Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall. I needed to decline their kind invitation in order to teach the Bible to pastors and leaders for the last week.

Today I want to continue in a series that I began a couple of weeks ago from the book of Revelation. There are lots of things people look for in a church. You may be checking out this church today for possible regular attendance or membership. Perhaps you have a mental check list for what you are looking for in a church. Maybe you are looking for a church that is really welcoming and

warm where there is a sense of love in the church. Perhaps you are looking for a church with solid Bible teaching or maybe you are a parent and you are looking for a safe, positive environment to support the raising of your children. You may be single and you are checking the church out because you are looking for a potential mate who will share your values and you think that church is a lot more likely to contain some good people over against going to a club or taking your chances on the Internet.

If you are transitioning from another church, maybe you are considering the Vineyard because you have a heart for social justice – the poor, the marginalized, the homeless, the disabled, the fatherless – and you heard that this is a church that really has a heart for the least, the last and the lost. Maybe you are checking out the Vineyard because you heard that this is a church that welcomes the gifts and the power of the Holy Spirit. You want to grow in your experience of God's presence and in the practice of his gifts. Maybe you want to be part of the church that connects the disconnected to Christ and you heard that Vineyard regularly introduces people to Christ. Maybe you are looking for a good place for your teens, or you have a passion for world missions, or you are in recovery and you heard about one of our groups, and you think you might be helped in your own process of healing.

There are a lot of very legitimate things that people look for in a church. We look for community. We need, each of us, to belong somewhere. We do not do well

in isolation. We need to put down roots somewhere, to know others, and to be known. We need a place to invest our lives, to use our talents and time, our energy and our money in a way that gives us significance and a sense of being used by Christ.

We look for a place to grow in our relationship with God. We can't grow unless we practice the historic means of growth – listening to God's Word as it is taught from the scripture, worshipping together with other believers, personal prayer and Bible study, taking communion, fellowshiping in accountable, authentic relationships. We can't grow unless we practice the disciplines that enable us to grow.

I believe that it is very legitimate for a person who moves to a new area, or who is in transition from their former church, who may be seeking possible church connection for the first time, to mentally construct a little check list regarding what they are looking for.

But there is a spin on church seeking that we rarely consider that ought to form the heart of our mental check list. We rarely consider what Jesus Christ is looking for in his church. Obviously, churches differ tremendously. Some are very big and some are very small. Some have dozens of programs and hundreds of small groups. Some churches are a small group and have virtually no programming. Some churches use set prayers and a very formal liturgy. Others

use more extemporaneous prayers and are far freer in worship. Some are contemporary; some are traditional. Some meet in buildings with stained glass windows. Others meet in schools, warehouses, in homes, on beaches, or on riverbanks. Some have paid leaders; others do not. Churches have different names, different traditions, different practices, different beliefs, different views of everything from the appropriate dress to wear to church to how and when to baptize and everything in between.

So underneath all of our different traditions, underneath all of our different practices, programs, denominations, and cultures, what are the things that Jesus has always looked for in his church over the past 2000 years? As you construct your mental checklist and you say: Here is what ought to be in the church, it might be a good idea to ask what it is that Jesus looks for in his church.

As we continue in our series from the book of Revelation, I've called today's talk, "What Jesus Is Looking For In the Church." Let's pray.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, I began a series from the book of Revelation. I told you then that we will not approach the book of Revelation as a secret code book yielding information only to some especially enlightened code breaker. The book of Revelation is written for the whole church not the specially anointed, prophetic elite. We saw this in Rev. 1:1,

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Rev 1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,

Unfortunately, because of the wild ways that this book has been interpreted, ordinary Christians today have become intimidated from even reading the book, much less attempting to understand it. The book of Revelation is not a Rorschach Ink Blot that permits us to find in it cruise missiles, or Islamic fundamentalists, or President Kennedy. By the way, you can tell that the writers of the new NBC series, Revelations are not exactly biblical scholars. In fact, they didn't even get the name right. The book is not titled Revelations – plural; it is Revelation – singular.

What we desperately need today is a sane, biblically faithful approach to the book of Revelation that gives this book back to ordinary people in the church.

Well, Revelation 2 and 3 contains messages to seven churches.

SLIDE – The Map (It would be wonderful if we could light up the name of the church as I name them on the map.)

These churches were located in a circle in what is now the nation of Turkey; what was back in the 1st century called the Roman Province of Asia. But beginning with the church in Ephesus, which was the commercial and trading center of

Asia, John writes to churches in Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Now, there has been a very unfortunate interpretive tradition in which Revelation 2 and 3 has been read allegorically. In other words, Revelation 2 and 3 has not been read as messages to actual churches in the 1st century but rather it has been read as a preview in which each church symbolizes a different period of the church's history. It all culminates in the low point of the lukewarm, passionless Laodicean church. So, in this allegorical tradition, Smyrna, the suffering church, becomes an allegory of the early church. Pergamum, the compromised church, becomes an allegory of the Dark Ages. Philadelphia becomes the mission-minded church of the 19th century. We are the church in Laodicea, lukewarm, comfortable, fat and apathetic. Every prophetic, allegorical interpreter always calls the current church the Laodicean church.

You hear that kind of preaching over and over when you listen to teaching on the book of Revelation. This is the Laodicean age. By interpreting the Bible that way, the preacher can pull out her or his anti-church venom and disdain for the contemporary church on the listeners. Have you been taught this kind of prophetic, allegorical scheme? Each church represents a different age of the church's history? It is pure nonsense! There is nothing in the text to suggest that the churches are simply symbols of different periods of church history. When you think about it, why would the suffering church in China today, or in Vietnam,

or the faithful remnant who suffered under Soviet rule, or in Nazi Germany be saddled with the label lukewarm Laodicean just because they lived in a certain time in history? In fact, the Christian church has always been incredibly diverse. The Christian church has also always needed different messages – messages of rebuke, correction, and warning. Just look at the letters written by the apostle Paul to 1st century churches. His message is so diverse.

You hear a lot of people saying today, “We’ve got to get back to the New Testament church.” I don’t want to get back to the New Testament church, if by the New Testament Church we’re talking about the church in Galatia, with its problem of legalism, or the church in Colossae, with its heretical philosophies, or the church in Corinth, with its immorality. The New Testament church was the church in its infancy, not in its full maturity. I don’t look back to the 1st century for the model church. I look ahead to the Kingdom of God regarding what the church is supposed to be when it becomes mature.

Now Revelation 2 and 3 contain seven messages. Each of the messages is written to a particular church, located in a particular city, at a particular time in history somewhere in the last third of the 1st century AD. Most contemporary scholars assign the book of Revelation to the last years of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, somewhere around 95 AD when it became the official policy of the Roman Empire to be hostile to Christians. Each of the churches mentioned in Rev. 2 and 3 faced different problems in their own environment.

Now, the message given to each church was not meant for that church alone, as if this book is of interest only to students of ancient history. Each message closes with a statement:

SLIDE – Rev. 2:7

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

This is repeated over and over again. We read the same thing in v. 11:

SLIDE

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

And likewise, v. 17:

SLIDE

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

The Holy Spirit, not only past tense, said something to a church that existed back in the 1st century AD and the Holy Spirit is speaking present tenses to churches today. The Spirit is speaking to churches in the city of Columbus. And the Holy Spirit is speaking to churches in Southern California. The Holy Spirit is speaking to churches in Pakistan, Vietnam, Zambia, and China. The Holy Spirit, present tense, speaks to the church in every age.

As the Holy Spirit not only speaks to a church—as if his voice is confined to our particular church or our particular situation—the Holy Spirit speaks to the churches, plural.

SLIDE – Rev. 2:7

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

So each message that we read in Rev. 2 and 3 was meant for a particular church, like the 1st century church in Ephesus, or the church in Smyrna, or Philadelphia, or Laodicea who faced particular issues and problems, but each message is also what the Holy Spirit is speaking to churches everywhere at all times.

The reason why John writes to seven churches is because seven is the Jewish symbol of completeness. These seven churches represent the whole church, the complete church, everywhere in every age for the last 2000 years.

What difference does this make? People often ask: Was the book of Revelation just written for 1st century Christians or is it entirely future, written for Christians living at the end of the age, as is portrayed in the NBC mini-series titled Revelations, or is it a mix? Part of it is written for then, Rev. 1, 2, and 3 – which was written for back then and then beginning with Rev. 4 it picks up with a vision of the future.

I believe the book of Revelation is properly read the way the whole New Testament should be read. The Holy Spirit was speaking a message to the people back in the 1st century, a message that the people back then could understand. Therefore, the book of Revelation is not about cruise missiles and fundamentalist Islam, and Michael Jackson. The Holy Spirit was speaking to people back in the 1st century about their world and their issues and their problems.

But the book of Revelation is also a book in which the Holy Spirit continues to speak to ordinary men and women, who are not code breakers, about our world, our issues, and our concerns. The book of Revelation is therefore always present tense. It is what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches today. It is what the Holy Spirit is saying to Vineyard Columbus right now.

And as I said in the first week, the book of Revelation is heavens perspective on life in this world.

One last thing about the book of Revelation. It is not simply a book written to encourage and comfort churches that are suffering. Many people say that the book of Revelation is a book of encouragement and comfort simply written to churches that are suffering. But as we read through these seven messages, we are going to find that encouragement in the face of suffering is just one of the

needs of the churches. Some of the churches were not poor and struggling. They were wealthy and washed out.

You see, this book is the book written with seven different introductions. I've heard about Japanese comic books that have seven different endings, and you get to pick the ending. Well, this book is a book with seven different introductions and you get to pick the introduction depending on the issue facing your church. We find our place in the book of Revelation and the book of Revelation has a different message to us depending on where we find our place.

The book of Revelation tells us that there is a great cosmic battle going on and every human being has to decide where their ultimate loyalty lies. Every human being is called into this cosmic battle. Are you going to be loyal to Jesus Christ, who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, or are you going to give your worship and your life to the least counterfeit king? Each of us has to find our place in the book.

So the book speaks to the church that is suffering today in China and Iraq. The book also speaks to the nearly dead church in Scandinavia. This book speaks to the utterly compromised church that existed during the Renaissance and it speaks to the wealthy suburban church today. All churches are spoken to in the book of Revelation, and all churches are called to engage in the battle, and all

churches are asked the hard questions: Who are you worshipping and where are your loyalties?

So how should we read these seven messages? Jesus is interested in growing his church. Jesus is the chief pastor of every church. If we look at the Roman Catholic church, it is Jesus, not the Pope, who is the chief pastor of the Catholic Church. It is Jesus, not the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is the chief pastor of the Anglican Church. It is Jesus, not the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, who is the chief pastor of the Southern Baptist Church. And it is Jesus, not Rich Nathan, or some other human being who is the chief pastor of Vineyard Columbus.

As our chief pastor, Jesus patrols our church, he inspects our church, he examines our church, and he guards our church. Jesus wants to grow his church. As the chief pastor, he models for us what pastoral ministry looks like. I want to show you this because these messages model pastoral ministry. I think these two chapters model for us what parenting and mentoring looks like.

As you go through the messages, you find that most of them contain five elements. First of all, Jesus reveals himself to his church. Rev. 2:1,

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Rev 2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:

Secondly, Jesus knows his church, Rev. 2:2, and 13

SLIDE

Rev 2:2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

SLIDE

Rev 2:13 I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

In each of the messages, Jesus communicates that he knows the real truth about the church. He can see below appearance and below surface impressions.

Third, Jesus affirms five of the churches, Rev. 2:2 and 3; 9, and 13

SLIDES

Rev 2:2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

Rev 2:3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Rev 2:9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Rev 2:13 I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Two of the churches get no affirmation – the church in Sardis and the church in Laodicea. But the church always lives with criticism: Why aren't you doing more to correct this or that societal problem? Why doesn't your worship suit our taste?

Vineyard Columbus is often criticized. Do you know the criticism I hear the most about our church? There are a lot of things that we as a large church can do. We can minister to a diversity of people in an amazing way. We can have interpreters for the deaf. We can do simultaneous translation of messages into Spanish and Portuguese. We can have classes for special needs young adults and the developmentally disabled. We can run a free medical and dental clinic. We can have hundreds of home groups meeting every day of the week at any particular time – so people can connect relationally. We can build a community center to provide legal services, daycare, and vocational training to our community. There are a lot of things that a large church can do but there is one thing a large church can't do that we get criticized about all the time. That is a large church can never be a small church.

We can have great worship. We can have great ministries. We can have lots and lots of places for people to connect in fellowship but we can never be a small church.

I sometimes tease our children's pastor and say: Linda, did you put each child on your lap this week and hug them? Did you ask them about their pets? We

have 1300+ children every weekend; of course she didn't do that. The teachers in the classes know the children by name.

Jesus doesn't just point out what the church doesn't do, he affirms the church. Because there are almost always problems in the church, churches are not perfect, pristine places, so many critics of the church both within and outside the church expect the church to be this ideal human society. Jesus knows the truth about the church. Jesus knows that if you are going to catch a lot of fish, as we do in Vineyard Columbus, you are going to have to clean a lot of fish, and if you are going to care for sheep, you will find out that sheep bite.

So Jesus corrects and warns his church. Rev. 2:4 and 5; 14-16,

SLIDES

Rev 2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

Rev 2:5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place

Rev 2:14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.

Rev 2:15 Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Rev 2:16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

The final element that we find in common in these messages is that Jesus offers each of the churches a promise regarding what will happen if they overcome in

their particular life situation. I want to go through each of these elements because I think Jesus is offering us a five-step model for pastoring the church.

What do you look for in a pastor? I also believe that Jesus is offering us a five-step model for mentoring people. What should you look for in a mentor – a mentor on your job, a spiritual mentor? Finally, I think Jesus is offering us a five-step model for parenting. What is at the heart of raising children?

So, let's go through these one by one. In following Jesus' model as chief shepherd, as chief pastor over the church, we could say that if we are going to grow and thrive, we need leaders who will reveal themselves to us. We don't need professionals, people who simply have a finely honed skill. We don't just need a bunch of professional services. What you and I need is an authentic human being, who allows me and you into their life to some degree. In other words, let me share with you the way I walk through this particular problem. Not just good advice, but a model of another human being, who has to wrestle with the same issues that we wrestle with and who is overcoming.

Years ago I watched a movie called *Little Man Tate*, starring Jody Foster. Jody Foster was portrayed as a white-trash, party girl, who had a genius for a son. Her son was taken away by a brilliant expert on child protégés. Jody Foster was convinced that her son would never reach his potential with her as his mother. But her son didn't thrive with the expert. Instead, he began to emotionally

collapse in on himself. What he wanted and needed was not a professional. He needed his mother.

The most powerful influencers in our lives are people who let us into their lives, and form relationships with us. Mentors who say: Let me share with you some of the problems we had in our first year of marriage. Professional mentors who say: You know, when I was beginning my career, here are the issues I needed to deal with in order to develop as a manager and a leader. We need pastors who are not aloof from the church and surrounded by bodyguards, but who are in the midst of the church revealing themselves as authentic people.

The first thing is Jesus reveals himself to his church. That is absolutely necessary for anyone who wishes to be a pastor, leader or parent.

Second, Jesus says: I know you. If you are going to grow and thrive we need to be known. We don't need generic, off the shelf principles for growth: Here is a book, read this; here is a tape, listen to this. We need someone who can look us in the eye and say: I know you. Jesus, of course, is that person par excellence. Look at Rev. 2:18,

SLIDE

Rev 2:18 "To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

His eyes burn through us to our core. Jesus knows your fears and your potential, your sins and your talents. He knows your past and your future. He knows your needs and your cares. No one in the world knows you like Jesus. That is why no one in the world has the right to speak to us in the way that Jesus speaks to us. He knows us. He knows what will make us succeed and he knows what will make us fail. He knows how we can build our lives and he knows what will destroy us. No one knows us like Jesus.

But you know, human beings can share Jesus' ministry as we get close enough to other people to be able to speak with authority. As parents we are to become experts on our kids. What is your child's temperament? How do they process information? What is their learning style? Do you know that, parents? What discourages your child? What encourages them? What do they do well? What do they do poorly? Is your child a leader, or a follower? What are the temptations that your child faces? Who are their friends? What is the call on your child's life? Parents, are you an expert on your child?

In a church of this size, obviously no individual pastor, not even paid staff can intimately know every single person. That is why we broke our church into small groups. This is our pastoral care setting. The reason why we urge you, brothers and sisters, to be in a small group, a women's group, or a men's group is so you can be known. We need to hear a word from God that is addressed specifically to us. The reason why we assign marriage mentors to people before we marry

them is because we need people who don't just give us off-the-shelf generic counsel for building our marriages. We need counsel that is specifically tailored to us. A good mentor knows his student.

Jesus reveals himself to his church. Jesus knows his church. Jesus says he knows me!

The third step is that Jesus affirms his church. If we are going to grow and thrive, we need to be affirmed. How desperately we need and crave affirmation. Watch people who have been raised with huge amounts of disapproval – folks who grow up with lots of condemnation. Even as adults they walk around with this huge, Grand Canyon-size hole in their souls asking everyone they connect with the same question: Will you affirm me?

Why do otherwise smart single people marry utter losers? On the whole, I'm starting to feel good about myself. I'm beginning to make some progress in following Christ. Why don't I hook myself up with a loser who comes with huge amounts of baggage just because he says he loves me? Yes, that is what I will do. Then I can waste maybe five, ten, or twenty years of my life. Why do smart, otherwise successful single women, allow themselves to be continually mistreated by some man? Again, I'm beginning to feel okay about myself. I'm making a little progress. I'm gaining a little traction in my life. I've got a decent job. I'm in fellowship. Why don't I just go out and find someone who will treat me

like dryer lint? Gosh, it's been nearly six months since my self-esteem was shredded by someone else.

There is this Grand Canyon-size hole in the soul where a woman or man is walking around asking the question constantly: Who will affirm me? Will you affirm me? Will you say "I love you"?

Have you ever met someone who gives you their resume in the first five minutes? They name drop everyone they know. They share with you all of their accomplishments. Look at my car. Look at my house. Aren't they impressive? Look at the athletic awards I won in High School, or college.

A dear friend of my wife and mine recently told us a story of meeting her college roommate's fiancée. This man was so desperate for affirmation that he literally took out his high school and college transcripts and showed our friend his grades. Look at this, he said, I made Dean's list six quarters in a row. She said it was like this 30-year old guy just regressed back into being six years old and was saying: Mommy, will you affirm me?

Every human being on earth, without exception, needs to be affirmed and needs to feel approval. Parents, your kids need constant affirmation, even if they communicate that they don't care, or that your affirmation is not important to them. Married people, your mates crave constant affirmation and approval.

They need to know that you esteem them. There is nothing more devastating to a marriage than when spouses withhold affirmation from each other. Bosses, your employees need words and gestures of affirmation. Teachers, your students need to be affirmed and commended. Jesus knows that people thrive and grow only when they are in an atmosphere of acceptance and affirmation.

Fourth, Jesus corrects and warns his church. We all need correction, if we are going to thrive and grow. People don't just need non-judgmental pals like the folks on Friends, someone who will simply be there for us no matter what, and will never challenge our ideas or our behaviors. We might say: Gosh, we'd love to have some folks who would unconditionally accept us. But love does not mean that we simply give blanket approval to another person's false ideas, or bad conduct. We read in Rev. 3:19,

SLIDE

Rev 3:19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

Real love offers correction:

- Not that way, this way.
- That way will destroy you.
- If you continue that way, you are going to go over a cliff.
- I care enough about you to say something to you that might cause you to be upset with me.

- I care enough about you to put our relationship at risk.
- I care enough about you, a parent says, to make things temporarily uncomfortable for both of us.
- A spouse says: I love you too much to watch you destroy yourself with this addiction. I will hold a mirror up for you.
- A boss says: I care enough about you and about this company to hold you accountable.

It is an act of love to correct in grace. Not blasting people; not here's why you are a total failure – correct in grace. Brothers and sisters, we need correction. In fact, in a survey of the best companies in America to work for, one common factor was the boss' willingness to receive input and correction. A person who cannot be corrected without becoming incredibly defensive will become unusable by the Lord. A child or adult who cannot be corrected is on a path away from Christ, away from the church, and potentially on their way to hell.

We need to keep open ears to our pastors, to our leaders, to the Word of God. Is someone trying to correct you. Are you able to hear them?

Finally, we all need the promise of a better future. In each of these messages Jesus offers a promise to those who conquer. To those who remain true to Christ, despite the pressures in their lives, for those who remain loyal to the King

of Kings, and Lord of Lords, Jesus offers a promise. If we are going to grow and thrive, we need a promise of a better future.

I hate listening to preaching that just tells me how awful I am. The reason why I, as a pastor, do not beat up on you is because I have always personally loathed being beaten up on. Jesus does not beat up on his people. He motivates us by picturing a better future for us, if we follow him.

Do you know what I mean by preaching that beats up on you?

- You are just a rotten Christian.
- You don't really care about the poor. You are so selfish.
- Didn't you see that homeless guy outside picking his way through the dumpster? You fat Christian, you drove right by him in your expensive car. What's the matter with you?
- You aren't compassionate enough.

When I hear that kind of preaching, and friends that kind of preaching is everywhere in the church, it doesn't produce a hunger for holiness in me, or a hunger for Christ. In fact, it produces rebellion in me. What produces a hunger for holiness and a hunger for Christ in me is hearing a word of promise: Rich, you can be a better man than you are. That is what Jesus says to you.

- Beloved daughter, you can be a better woman than you are right now.
- Beloved son, you can be a better man than you are right now.

- You can be freer than you are.
- You can have more joy than you presently have.
- You don't have to labor under the weight of sin and guilt.
- You don't have to constantly live with anxiety or a sense of failure.
- Beloved, I have more for you than you presently experience. You can know me better than you do, Jesus says.

As a pastor I am responsible for constantly painting a picture for this church of a better future. As a pastor I am responsible for constantly painting for you a future that is filled with hope and the possibility of redemption in the future and of Christ.

As parents, we always have to offer our children a promise of something better. Whatever our kids have fallen into, however many mistakes they've made, we constantly have to encourage them and say: You don't have to live this kind of life. You don't have to keep repeating this kind of mistake. You can be better than this.

Jesus comes to us and says: You can beat this. Addicts, you can beat this with my strength and the help of other people.

So Jesus says in Rev. 2:7,

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Rev 2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Now quickly – what is Jesus looking for in the church then? We'll continue this next week, but he wants to grow his church. He wants to train his church, like a good parent. What is he looking for?

Quickly, let's look at one of the churches and we'll finish with this: Jesus is looking for a relationship with us, not just activity from us. Rev. 2:2-5,

SLIDE

Rev 2:2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

Rev 2:3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Rev 2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

Rev 2:5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Here is a church that has so much going for it. It is working itself to the point of exhaustion. It has sound teaching. It is willing to sacrifice to promote the cause of Christ. But there is a fatal flaw in the Ephesian church? In all of its good activity, its good teaching, its good sacrifice, the church has missed the best thing – a love relationship with Jesus, her Lord. It is reminiscent of Paul's famous words in 1 Cor. 13:1-3,

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1Co 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

1Co 13:2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

1Co 13:3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Brothers and sisters, do you know any churches that are busy doing so many wonderful things for Jesus that they don't pause long enough to build a relationship with Jesus? There is simply no time taken to worship Christ or to just to ask in his presence? There is no pause button in which the church says: Hey, that work will always be there, but what we need most is just to sit at Jesus' feet for a little while.

Do you know any churches that are like Martha in Luke's story in Luke 10 who was busy anxiously serving Jesus, but who didn't stop to just listen to Jesus speak? Friends, aren't most of us guilty of substituting work for Christ in the place of relating to Christ? I know I need to raise my hand and say: guilty as charged.

Close your eyes for just a moment. I want you to hear what Jesus is saying to you. Jesus is saying to each one of you: I want you – not just your activity; not just your money; not just what you can do; what I want most is for you to give yourself to me. I don't need your heroic sacrifices. I don't need your exhausting activity. I appreciate those things, but what I want most is you. I want you to

push the pause button on your life and look at me. In all your busyness, I want you to push the pause button and relate to me.

How many of you would say: I've been really busy doing so much, so much work at my job, so much in my family, so much ministry that I have missed Jesus Christ altogether in the midst of the busyness. I wonder if some of your spouses would say to you: I appreciate your hard work, the fact that you are a good provider, but that is not a substitute for a relationship with me. I appreciate your care for your kids and your maintenance of the house, your meal preparation, but that is not a substitute for your relationship with me.

I wonder how many of your kids would say: Thanks mom, for the bike. Thanks, dad, for putting a roof over our heads. Thanks for feeding me and clothing me. But what I really want is you.

I think of the verse in the old Beatles song, "She's Leaving Home":

We gave her most of our lives
Sacrificed most of our lives
We gave her everything money could buy
She's leaving home after living alone
For so many years.

We never thought of ourselves
Never a thought of ourselves
We struggled all of our lives to get by
She's leaving home after living alone
For so many years.

I wonder how many of you might say that about your own relationship with your own parents. We were made for relationship, friends. In fact, there is something inside of us that is never satisfied until we touch relationship and love. You can be incredibly successful; you can have all kinds of accomplishments and activity, but there is going to be a hole inside of you until you push the pause button and learn to love. Jesus says: I don't just want your activity, I want a relationship with you.

Jesus is looking for a willingness to suffer in this church and not just success in the eyes of the world. There are a lot of churches that are outwardly successful, but the church that Jesus commends without any correction at all is the church at Smyrna. Rev. 2:9-10,

SLIDE

Rev 2:9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Rev 2:10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Apparently, the church in Smyrna was experiencing pressure from Romans on the one hand and the non-Christian Jewish community on the other. This is an intra-family dispute. When he talks about the synagogue of statement, this is not an anti-Semitic statement. This is an intra-family dispute. There are a lot of intra-family disputes, things that within a family you might say to one another than seem quite harsh, but that you would totally reject if they came from the outside.

John, a Jewish believer in Jesus speaks about a synagogue of Satan because the word Satan means slander. Apparently, the Jewish Christians that were part of the church were being slandered by non-Christian Jews to the Roman authorities. As a result, they were being persecuted financially and physically.

Jesus pays special attention to the suffering church. It cost a great deal for people to follow Jesus at different times and places. There is a report that just came out of Pakistan a month ago in March. Christians in Pakistan are particularly vulnerable and being persecuted now.

A woman named Hanifan Bibi is a Christian mother who worked as a domestic servant for a Muslim family. In January her employer's husband and several of his friends broke into the family's home and kidnapped Mrs. Hanifan along with

her husband, son and nephew. Mrs. Hanifan was stripped, sexually humiliated and tortured in front of her family with the perpetrators filming the attack.

The kidnappers then turned Mrs. Hanifan over to the police and had her charged with theft. She was hospitalized for her injuries. The family believes the attack was revenge for Mrs. Hanifan's refusal to provide the Muslim men with Christian women for sex.

There was another report out of Pakistan this past year about a Christian man who was jailed for violating the anti-blasphemy laws because he was trying to make an area tidy. He allegedly placed some rubbish near a wall of a mosque. He was thrown in jail for a year and contracted tuberculosis. While he was sick in the jail, a police officer beat him to death. He said it was his Muslim duty.

The moderator of the Presbyterian church of Pakistan said: "We are very sad about what has happened. I can only say we Christians are feeling helpless in Pakistan. Churches can do nothing."

The Catholic Archbishop said: "It is with sadness and sorrow that Catholic Christians in Pakistan have laid to rest another victim of fanatical hatred."

In Iraq, five churches last August were bombed in Baghdad, and four in Mosul. Within a single day's attack, they killed twelve people. In October five churches

in Baghdad were hit on the first day of the Muslim month of Ramadan. In November eight people were killed in two church bombings. It is considered in Iraq to be justifiable homicide to kill a Muslim convert to Christianity. This Christmas, Christian in Iraq celebrated Christmas in their homes because they feared attack. In fact, pastors and priests avoided the traditional midnight services and told parishioners to stay away out of concern for their safety.

In China, Christians, especially Christian pastors, are regularly persecuted and tortured. Pastor Gong Shuegliang was sentenced to life in prison in October 2002. This case involved the arrest and sentencing of many women in Pastor Gong's church. Many women were tortured until they signed an affidavit accusing Pastor Gong of rape. They later renounced their signed confessions and were all sentenced to prison.

Jesus pays special attention to the suffering of his children.

So, what is Jesus looking for in his church? Underneath all the programs and all the activity, and all the good things and doctrine taught, Jesus is looking for relationship with us not just activity from us. And Jesus is looking for a willingness to suffer from us, not just success in the eyes of the world.

Let's pray.

What Jesus Is Looking For In The Church

Rich Nathan

April 16-17, 2005

Revelation: Looking at Life From the Perspective of Heaven Series

Revelation 2:1-11

- I. What To Look For In The Book Of Revelation
 - A. Don't Look For An Allegory Of Church History.
 - B. Do Look For What The Holy Spirit Is Saying To Every Church.

- II. What To Look For In A Pastor Or Parent
 - A. Jesus As Chief Pastor Reveals Himself To His Church. (Rev. 2:1)
 - B. Jesus As Chief Pastor Knows His Church. (Rev. 2:2, 13)
 - C. Jesus As Chief Pastor Affirms His Church. (Rev. 2:2, 3, 9)
 - D. Jesus As Chief Pastor Corrects And Warns His Church. (Rev. 2:4, 5, 14-16)
 - E. Jesus As Chief Pastor Offers Each Church A Promise. (Rev. 2:7, 10, 11)

- III. What Jesus Looks For In A Church
 - A. Jesus Is Looking For Relationship With Us Not Just Activity From Us. (Rev. 2:2-5)
 - B. Jesus Is Looking For A Willingness to Suffer Not Just Success In The Eyes Of The World. (Rev. 2:9, 10)