

Session 2

JESUS AND THE SEVEN CHURCHES

September 20, 2026

Memory Verse

*“Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.
To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which
is in the paradise of God.”*

– REVELATION 2:7, CSB



Jesus and the Seven Churches

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Jesus's letters to the seven churches of ancient Asia offered commendation and criticism we can learn from today.

CALL TO ACTION: Like the early church, we are called to ongoing faithfulness to Jesus.

In 1860, Miss Grace Bedell wrote a very important letter. She was eleven, and the letter in question was addressed to presidential hopeful Abraham Lincoln. In the charming way that only children can manage, she wrote of her family, hoped Lincoln had a daughter who might write back to her (he had only sons), and gave him some thoughtful (and hilarious) advice: Grace recommended Lincoln grow “whiskers” to enhance his thin face and thus gain more votes.¹

To this prudent campaign advice, Lincoln responded and offered the following reply about the beard: “As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affection if I were to begin it now?”² The answer to Lincoln’s question was clearly a resounding no. He grew a rather famous beard after this, and many of us, when we call up images of Lincoln in our heads, see him with “whiskers.”

Throughout human history, many letters have prompted action (some even world changing). Lincoln’s choice to grow a beard didn’t quite change the world, but today, we’ll explore some letters that did. These letters found in Revelation are still useful, and still hold the power to change lives today, thousands of years after they were written.



Have you ever written a letter (or other type of message) that prompted some sort of action? What did you write and what happened?



Why can this type of communication be effective?

Session Summary

Jesus's letters to the ancient churches in Asia still hold truths for us today. In these letters, Jesus commended and criticized, instructing the believers in areas they needed to correct their faith. In them, we can often see ourselves and find direction and encouragement.

1. Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum (Revelation 2:1-17)

These are the words of Jesus to His churches. In them, He both commended and corrected, giving feedback for these individual congregations that benefitted not only those particular bodies, but the church as a whole. Now, even thousands of years after these original letters were written, the issues they address are still relevant.

The church is not a building but a group of people, and the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of individuals within the church body can either steer the congregation toward Christ or away from Him.

The letters, generally, follow something like this:³

- An address to the angel of the church
- A depiction of the risen Christ
- "I know" (most often, this is followed by commendation)
- "But I have this against you" (most often, this includes correction)
- "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7)
- A promise



What did Jesus commend the church in Ephesus for? What correction did He give?

Ephesus. Ephesus was a large and powerful city in the ancient Roman Empire, heavily devoted to Artemis worship. This fertility goddess (who they called "savior") had a massive cult presence in the city (the temple for Artemis even functioning as a bank). You may recall Paul's extended ministry there, as recorded in Acts (Acts 20:31). We also have Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians).

The Ephesian church was praised for their hard work. They didn't tolerate evil people and had tested false apostles and "found them to be liars" (v. 2). They hadn't grown weary in their perseverance for Christ. But they'd lost their love for God and had failed to follow what Jesus called the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-38). This does not mean they had lost their salvation (thankfully, this is not possible), but they were in serious need of change. "In these words, the faithful were promised spiritual rewards. The "tree of life" and the "paradise of God" refer to the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 22:2), a reward awaiting all believers.⁴



What was the church in Smyrna doing well? What were they to correct?

Smyrna. Smyrna was a port city north of Ephesus. The large Jewish community there strongly opposed Christianity, which Jesus acknowledged. When the emperor, Domitian, rolled out the edict saying everyone must worship him, he exempted the Jews, who did not want this freedom to extend to the Christians.⁵

Unlike the other churches, those in Smyrna received only commendation from Christ. They suffered opposition from the Jews, who were slandering them. The description of the Jews in verse 9 doesn't mean they weren't of Jewish descent, but rather points to their uncircumcised hearts (Romans 2:28-29). Their spiritual warfare would continue with a short prison stay to test their faith, but the reward for endurance would be "the crown of life" (v. 10; James 1:12). The "second death" refers to the "lake of fire" in Revelation 20:14 (Revelation 20:10,15).⁶ But faithful believers will "never be harmed" by this (v.11).



What did Jesus commend Pergamum for? What notes of correction did He give?

Pergamum. The ancient city of Pergamum was about fifty miles north of Smyrna. Christians were harshly persecuted there for their "disloyal and unpatriotic" refusal to participate in Domitian's emperor worship.⁷ Jesus's note of "Satan's throne" (v. 13) was a reference to the centrality of emperor worship in their culture. This was a difficult place for believers to live (even worse than Smyrna). The "sharp double-edged sword" (v. 12) is also referenced in 1:16, symbolizing the Word of God's power to judge.

In His commendation, Jesus acknowledged the difficult environment these believers found themselves in and commended the people for holding onto their faith. They didn't even deny Him when a faithful believer, Antipas, was martyred. Yet, they allowed the Nicolaitans, heretics who taught idolatry and immorality⁸ embraced by their society, to place a stumbling block in front of them. Jesus called for their repentance. The “manna” referenced in verse 17 pointed to Jesus's care of the people. White stones were given victors in the athletic games of the ancient Greeks, allowing them to retire and might be in view with the closing reference to this church.⁹

2. Thyatira and Sardis (Revelation 2:18–Revelation 3:6)



What did Jesus commend Thyatira for? What notes for correction did He give?

Thyatira. Thyatira sat on the Lycus River, about thirty miles southeast of Pergamum. Its trade guilds were devoted to patron (little g) gods and goddesses, and a huge pressure existed there for Christians to participate in a culturally acceptable lifestyle of idolatry. Thyatira, whose letter is featured in the middle of this set of letters, was the smallest city written to, but received the longest letter.

This is the only time in Revelation that Jesus is called “the Son of God” (v. 18). The imagery in verse 18 points us back to Revelation 1:14-15.¹⁰

The church was commended for their “love, faithfulness, service, and endurance” (v. 19). Jesus criticized these believers for partaking in the pagan culture that surrounded them. They were behaving in a sexually immoral manner and eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (the New Testament warned against this). Jezebel is a callback to the evil queen of Israel in the time of the kings (1 Kings 16, 18, 19, 21). She, along with her husband Ahab, promoted idol worship and actively persecuted God's church, leading the people down an unfaithful path. Her “children” (v. 23) referenced the called out unfaithful in the congregation. Just like the people in the days of Jezebel were called to repent, so were the people of Thyatira, though apparently not everyone was unfaithful (v. 24). The faithful will enjoy ruling with Christ at His second coming (Revelation 20:4,6).¹¹

 What was Sardis doing well? What were they to correct?

Sardis. Sardis was one of the oldest cities in Asia Minor. The people there were obsessed with death and immortality, and worshiped Artemis.¹²

The people of Sardis received no commendation from Christ, only criticism. They were living, but spiritually dead. We aren't saved by our works, but good works flow out of genuine faith. Yet, this was missing from the people of Sardis. They needed deep spiritual change, and this letter served as a wake-up call. They were to remember God's blessings and earnestly repent. Some among their congregation were faithful, but their numbers were few (v. 4). The faithful were worthy of heaven and their names would be recorded in the book of life.

 How might we be threatened to go the same way as the people of Sardis? How might we guard against this?

3. Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 3:7-22)

 What does Jesus commend the church in Philadelphia for? What correction did He give?

 What was Laodicea doing well? What should they correct?

Philadelphia. Philadelphia was about forty miles southeast of Sardis. After a devastating earthquake in AD 17, the people carefully planned for the future (and any earthquakes it held). Evidently, they also faced Jewish opposition similar to the church in Smyrna.¹³

Jesus is described here as Holy and true, almighty in authority and power. The “key of David” is a reference to Isaiah 22:22.

The believers in Philadelphia were praised for their faithful works. Even though they had little power, they were faithful. Whatever injustice they faced, Christ would make it right (v. 9). Scholars aren't agreed on the meaning of "keep you from the hour of testing" (v. 10), this could mean that they would be removed before the time of tribulation begins (7:14), or that they will be protected within it. "Those who live on the earth" (v. 10) refer to non-believers.¹⁴

Laodicea. Laodicea was an ancient trade center famous for its textiles. Idol worship, Zeus especially, flourished in Laodicea. They also had a water problem. They didn't have direct access to the cold water available in the mountains, or the nearby hot springs. They had to bring in their water, and when it arrived, it was lukewarm.¹⁵

Like their water, the faith of the Laodiceans was lukewarm. It was worthless and not genuine. Jesus wrote that He would spit them out (like you might a sip of lukewarm water). Their wealth lulled them into a false sense of security. They thought they didn't need anything and didn't realize that their need was actually great. They needed to repent and turn to true faith. Jesus had been metaphorically locked outside the door in Laodicea, but He was at the door, knocking and ready to enter again when they repented. He also promised that the faithful would one day reign with Christ.



Which of these churches stands out to you most? What are you encouraged or challenged by in their situation?

Conclusion

These age-old letters highlight age-old heart problems. The areas for correction that Jesus outlined are still areas where many individuals and church bodies need correction today. These letters remind us that the church and her people aren't perfect, even when they have a lot going for them. Studying these letters opens a door for us to reflect: Where do we struggle similarly?

Just like Jesus wrote to the church in Laodicea, if we have locked Him out of our lives, Jesus hasn't given up on us. He's standing the door of our lives, knocking and wanting to come back in. All we must do is repent and open the door (3:20).



In what ways does the modern church still display some aspects of faith Jesus commended in these letters?



How do we see these types of challenges still present in the church today?



How is God calling you to respond today based on these letters to His churches? If Jesus were to write you a letter, what might it say?

Memorize

“Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

- Revelation 2:7, CSB

References

¹⁴Grace Bedell to Abraham Lincoln, October 15, 1860,” House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/25340>

²⁴Abraham Lincoln to Grace Bedell, October 19, 1860,” House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/25339>.

³Christopher A. Beetham and Nancy L. Erickson, eds., *The NIV Application Commentary on the Bible*, One-Volume Edition, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan Academic, 2024), 1290.

⁴A. Boyd Luter, “Revelation,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Chad Brand et al., eds., “Nicolaitans,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1190.

⁹Luter.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Beetham and Erickson.