

The Redeemer Calls His People Toward Renewal

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Jesus calls His people to recognize their sin, repent of it, and remember what He has in store for those who persevere unto the end.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Revelation 2–3

“We’re losing the nerve to call people to repentance.”

That’s what a retired pastor recently told me, expressing his concern that while some churches love to champion the unconditional love and grace of God, rarely does their message include Christ’s call to repentance. Many churches, he said, want to meet people where they are, in whatever mess they’re in, and let the Spirit clean them up later. God will deal with their sins down the road.

In the Gospels, however, Jesus seems much more extreme. His good news was the announcement of God’s kingdom, and the *first* word to follow? “Repent!” (Mark 1:14-15). No wonder Jesus didn’t tell the rich young ruler to walk with Him for a while until he stopped coveting. No, He got to the root of an unrepentant heart when He told the man to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. In other words, *Repent. Turn around.*

? How do you respond to the idea that some churches today may downplay repentance because they want to avoid appearing harsh or unloving?

Group Time

Point 1: Jesus calls His people to recognize their sin (Rev. 3:14-18).

¹⁴ “Write to the angel of the church in Laodicea: Thus says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the originator of God’s creation: ¹⁵ I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am going to vomit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, ‘I’m rich; I have become wealthy and need nothing,’ and you don’t realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I advise you to buy from me gold refined in the fire so that you may be rich, white clothes so that you may be dressed and your shameful nakedness not be exposed, and ointment to spread on your eyes so that you may see.

The last of the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 is Laodicea. Jesus’ assessment of this church made clear that it is not the church’s reputation before the community that matters most, not the hustle and bustle of church ministry, nor even doctrinal soundness, though these are important. King Jesus’ assessment goes to the heart because He sees beyond people’s words to their *works*. In this letter, Jesus wanted His people to recognize the sin that He exposes.



In what ways could Jesus’ statement “I know your works” bring you comfort? In what ways could it make you shudder?

Sin as Missing the Mark: We may refer to sin as a failure on the part of humans to live according to God’s _____, but we must recognize this failure is _____. We miss the mark when we deliberately choose to cast aside God’s intention for us.

Jesus’ assessment of Laodicea was *not* that the church was in outright rebellion against Him but that the church had become lukewarm—neither hot nor cold. Their spiritual life was marked by compromises, so they were not useful to the Lord but rather sickening. The Laodicean believers saw themselves as “rich,” as being wealthy and in need of nothing. Wealth had created the illusion of independence. But in reality, they were “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked” in their sin (Rev. 3:17).

Point 2: Jesus calls His people to repent of their sin (Rev. 3:19-20).

¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be zealous and repent.

How should the church in Laodicea respond to Jesus' assessment? Jesus called for passion and repentance (v. 19). But notice what came before that call to repentance: Jesus assured this church of His love. This sentiment resembles what we find in the Letter to the Hebrews, which draws on Proverbs: "My son, do not take the Lord's discipline lightly or lose heart when you are reproved by him, for the Lord disciplines the one he loves and punishes every son he receives" (Heb. 12:5-6; see Prov. 3:11-12).

The idea of Jesus rebuking a church doesn't sit well with many people today. *Isn't rebuke unloving? Isn't discipline harsh and unnecessary? Whatever happened to grace?* Wherever did we get the notion that the call to repentance is opposed to the championing of grace? When did truth and grace get separated? Or repentance and faith? To think that the message of grace and the call of repentance are opposed to one another is to miss the beautiful, grace-filled nature of what repentance actually is. The call to repent is one of the greatest expressions of the love of God.



In what ways do we sometimes separate Jesus' rebuke of us from His love for us?

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine _____ for one's sin, a turning away from one's sin toward _____, and a life that reflects _____ change and transformation.



Voices from Church History

"It is because the Laodicean Christians are still, despite everything, on Jesus' list of friends—and Jesus is a faithful friend, even if we are not—that he will tell them sharply and truly when they are in the wrong. Because he is not only a friend but their Lord, he will also punish them, not to devastate them but to bring them to their senses."¹

—Ambrose of Milan
(c. 339-397)

Point 3: Jesus calls His people to remember what awaits the faithful (Rev. 3:20-22).

²⁰ See! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

²¹ “To the one who conquers I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

²² “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The repentant heart is one that welcomes fellowship with the Savior. The image of Jesus standing at the door and knocking is often individualized in the Western imagination, so that we see Jesus at the door of an individual heart, waiting to come in and change us. This application of the verse is valid, but the primary context is within the local church. The picture alludes to stories in the Gospels where the master of the house returns suddenly to find some waiting for him and others apathetic or resistant to His arrival (ex. Matt. 25:1-30; Mark 12:1-12; 13:32-37; Luke 12:35-40). Those who are ready, those who repent, are the conquerors with Christ who will rule with Him forever.

This passage ends with the command to listen carefully to what the Spirit says to the churches. We should ask how sensitive our hearing is. Do we hear the call of our King to repentance? Do we see the call to repentance as a demonstration of His great love for us? God cares about the purity of His church because the church is the bride for whom Christ died. By fixing our eyes on Him, by gazing on His glory, by remembering His sacrifice, by considering the clothes of righteousness we have through His perfect life in our place, we can be raised from spiritual lethargy and reenergized for the mission He has given us.



In what ways does the promise of spiritual victory give us hope in our battle against spiritual sluggishness?

Daily Study


Day 1: Read Revelation 2:1-29

The letters to the seven churches are filled with insight into what constitutes a faithful Christian congregation. In the first four, we see several important emphases. In the letter to Ephesus, we're reminded of the need for a passionate, right relationship with God from which good works flow (and without which good works are dead). The letter to Smyrna reveals the reality of spiritual wealth even when earthly affliction and poverty is the experience of believers.

The letter to Pergamum includes a commendation for remaining faithful but also a warning against false teachings that had made headway into the congregation. The letter to Thyatira is an example of why sound doctrine is so important and what happens when people twist the doctrines of Scripture in order to justify and tolerate immoral behavior.

The common thread in most of these letters is the call to repent. That's the word for *turning around*, renouncing the wrong path and returning to the right path. Jesus' call is an invitation to follow Him into everlasting happiness, not a criticism coming from a King who wants to cut us down.

As you read these letters, note carefully how Jesus brings words of encouragement, critique, and exhortation together into one message. We have a King who is with us, who "knows our works," and who loves us and wants us to remain faithful to Him.

 Which of these four churches do you think has the most similarities with your own? How can you obey Jesus and be part of renewal in your congregation?

Voices from the Church

"Works without worship is not Christianity; it is godless moralism."³

—Brandon D. Smith

Day 2: Read Revelation 3:1-13

In New Testament times, the city of Sardis sat high atop a hill that intersected important trade routes. The Jewish community was wealthy, influential, and as prosperous as the rest of the city's inhabitants. Seemingly sheltered from harm, Sardis became known for its overconfident people and their busy lifestyle. Their lack of seriousness eventually led to the city's demise *twice*, when enemies breached the wall and overtook the slumbering guards.

The church in Sardis largely mirrored the community—overconfident, rich, preoccupied, and off guard. Christians even today must avoid the Sardis trap. Although some equate activity in a church with spiritual life, God sees through the hustle and bustle, and He ascertains the heart of His people. He will not be deceived. All our programs, events, and youth activities will not hide our churches' true spiritual state before God.



In what ways can spiritual busyness become a mask for spiritual complacency?

Day 3: Read Revelation 3:14-18

Oswald Chambers once wrote: “The bedrock of Christianity is repentance.”⁴ Repentance starts with recognition of our sin in light of Christ's holiness.

In the beginning portion of His letter to the church in Laodicea, Jesus laid out the reality of the church's spiritual state. It was not a pretty sight! It would have been easy for the congregation to be offended at such a stark assessment, but Jesus' purpose for exposing the congregation's lack of spiritual vitality was so that things might change.

That's ultimately what is beautiful about repentance. Once we recognize the glory of Jesus and we recognize the ugliness of our sin, we're in the position to turn around, to make a change, to start over and be refreshed.



How would you define *repentance* in your own words? What does it look like in practice?

Day 4: Read Revelation 3:19

I love the dramatic questions the early church asked of every adult who stepped into the baptismal waters: *Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness? Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?* The baptismal candidate would answer, “I renounce them” to each of these questions. That’s the negative aspect of repentance—renouncing evil.

Then the questions turned to the positive side of repentance: *Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in His grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey Him as your Lord?* The candidate would respond, “I do,” much like a wedding service. In these questions and answers, there is a clear sense of changing allegiance from Satan’s power to God’s kingdom.⁵



Why is it important for us to see repentance from both sides—turning from sin and turning to Christ?

Day 5: Read Revelation 3:20-22

Repentance is not something that comes naturally. We cultivate a life of ongoing repentance *on purpose*. We consider our actions in light of God’s grace toward us through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then we walk in a new way of life, committing daily to follow our Savior. We put to death the deeds of the flesh as we walk by the Spirit.

Jesus paints the picture of His followers *conquering* with Him. As we walk the road of faith, we see more and more ways that our lives fall short of God’s glory. This is the way it *should* be, not because we’re getting worse but because we’re getting *better*, closer to the light of God that exposes more and more of our remaining sinfulness. The victorious Christian life is marked not by the absence of sin but the presence of repentance. And one day, the victorious Christian life will mean we are, as the old hymn goes, “saved to sin no more.”



How can we encourage one another to repent regularly?

Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- Jesus calls His people to recognize their sin (Rev. 3:14-18).
- Jesus calls His people to repent of their sin (Rev. 3:19).
- Jesus calls His people to remember what awaits the faithful (Rev. 3:20-22).



How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?



Why should the cross provide us motivation to avoid sin?



What can we do to help ourselves and others see the call to repent as a loving gesture?

Notes
