

(Revelation) 03 Letters to the Seven Churches

Part 2

by David Pawson

Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation provide a model for how to address and correct the church, emphasizing the importance of approval, criticism, counsel, and assurance.

Duration: 50:59

Scripture: Revelation 2 - 3

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Christian Commitment"

Description

The video discussed the letters of Jesus to his churches, emphasizing their relevance for the church today. It highlighted the importance of actively listening and responding to Jesus' words, rather than just hearing them. The video also mentioned the unique structure of the letters, with a reversal of order in the middle and the appeal coming before the promise of reward in the last four letters. The speaker warned against the temptation of 'supermarket Christianity,' where people choose churches based on personal preferences, and instead encouraged staying committed and overcoming challenges within the church.

Transcript

But now let's get to the seven letters, we really must get down to that. Time marches on doesn't it? There are seven letters to seven churches but each has seven parts very, very clearly. And in fact on the sheet that you've got you'll find them listed down the left-hand column of the sheet.

You'll find the seven churches listed along the top of your sheet and the seven parts of each letter down the left. And we've laid out the letters side by side. I've found that that is by far the best way to study them.

It's what we call the synoptic view. Synoptic means to view together. Syn means together and optic, you know what that means, to look.

And so a synoptic view is to look together at something, to view things side by side and compare them. And it's when we do that that we see remarkable things. But before we do that, let me just run through the seven parts of each letter.

They did a very sensible thing in those days. They put the address to which the letter was addressed and then immediately after who the letter was from. Now I get loads of letters, far too many to deal with.

People send me their life story on twenty pages, closely written. I'm quite sure that I'm the one God has sent to help them with their personal problem. But if I answered all those letters I couldn't be here teaching you this morning.

But isn't it a silly custom that we have to put the name of the sender on the last page of a letter? That's crazy. So I get a thick letter and I've got to turn each page and get right to the end before I know who it's from. No such silliness in the ancient world.

Address, name of sender, who it's to, who it's from. And of course they wrote on a scroll and they rolled it up. And they rolled it up from the end, from the bottom, so that the postman just had to unroll the first bit to see who it was to and who it was from.

And that's why the book of Revelation is a letter and these seven letters are all letters. That's the form of an epistle in the ancient world. So the address comes first and each of the letters begins, to the angel of the church in Ephesus, to the angel of the church in Smyrna, to the angel of the church in Pergamon.

Now some commentators are quite sure that it wasn't an angel that the letter would be addressed to and so they changed that to pastor. But I have news for you, not all pastors are angels and I don't believe that that's a legitimate interpretation. Throughout the book of Revelation an angel is an angel and the book is full of them.

It is because angels were much more real to the early church in their thinking and experience that they had no difficulty with this. And apart from anything else, there was no way that John could get the letter to them unless an angel took it. But the letter is addressed to the angel who is the messenger of God to that church.

But that's the address. Then comes who it's from. And it's interesting that Jesus, who is sending the letter, never uses his name.

Simply, this is from he who, and a description of one of our Lord's attributes is in place of the sender's name. I find that fascinating because I believe he is describing that part of his own being that they have either forgotten or overlooked, or that part of his being they have not heard about but which they need to know. We need to remember all the names of Jesus, but there may be particular ones that we have overlooked and forgotten.

You know, some years ago I was talking to God and I said, God, I know your name but difficult to say. I know your name is Yahweh, or at least I think that's how it's said because I can never get a Jew to say it. They are so frightened of taking the name of the Lord in vain they will never use it.

And I've tried to catch Jews out and I've said to Jews in Israel, how is it you pronounce the name of God? And they say, you're not going to catch me, and they won't use it. So I'm hoping I'm saying it rightly, but Yahweh, I am. It's actually not even I am, it's a participle of the verb to be.

It's like the word being, being. And I said, Lord, I'm not sure that I can use your name in prayer to you. It's a lovely name but it doesn't come easily to me.

Would you please give me an English word that would mean the same to you as this? And I only tell you what immediately came into my mind as I said it, the word always, always. And from then on I got so excited. The name of my God is always, always.

And that's only his first name, he has an awful lot of second names. He is always my helper, always my strength, always my glory, always, always. Isn't that beautiful? That's the nearest I think you can get in English to the name Yahweh.

God is always. And then one of the three hundred titles of Jesus I love to use, Jesus is called Yes. Did you know that's one of his names? He is the yes to every promise of God.

Isn't that beautiful? Fancy having a father called always and a son called yes. You can't have a more positive face than that if you tried. Well, here is Jesus reminding the churches of some of his titles, some of his names, because his names always point to his nature.

He is saying, this is from the one who is like this, and he's reminding the church how they need to think about him. The third element in each letter is approval. He commends them, he thanks his Father for them, he says what's good.

Now here's a little lesson for you from Jesus himself. If you're going to criticize someone, say something nice first. It's a simple lesson in personal relations, but you find Jesus does it here, Paul does it in every one of his letters.

Even when he writes to Corinth, the church that was messed up, getting drunk at the Lord's table, that stopped believing in the resurrection, they were such a mess. But Paul begins by saying, I thank God you have every spiritual gift. He always tried to begin his letters with something good, something positive, something that he could commend.

There was only one letter Paul wrote where he could find nothing to commend the church and it's the letter to the Galatians. It's a red-hot letter written on asbestos paper I think because Paul was just angry right at the beginning with what was happening. Another gospel was destroying them and he went straight into that.

But normally in every letter, like Jesus himself, Paul said something good. So Jesus says, I know all about you and I'm so glad about this. I congratulate you on that.

Notice that Jesus is always concerned with deeds, with what people do. He knows everything that's done in every church. He knows everything you do and everything I do.

I know your deeds and so he commends them. Then he moves to criticism and accusation and he says, but I have this against you, and then he criticizes them. Moving on from that, he gives counsel or advice, what they need to do about the situation to put things right in the church.

And it's good advice. It's more than that, it's a command of him. To some of the churches he said, if you don't take my advice and put this right I will close your church down.

Jesus is not only in the business of opening churches but closing them down. He doesn't want churches that are an insult to him. He will close a church down and remove their lampstand so that the light will be removed because the light is being distorted.

It is misleading people. But he says, please put it right yourselves so that I won't need to come and deal with it myself. He gives every church the chance to put it right before he has to.

From advice he moves on to assurance. He wants to give them encouragement and he offers a reward to those who overcome. I want you to notice that the first place you learn to overcome difficulties and pressures is inside the church.

You will never resist the pressures outside the church unless you can overcome those inside. I told you that I've had more trouble in the last ten years than in the previous thirty in my ministry. Alas, I have to tell you, sadly it comes most of it from inside the church.

More of it is now coming from outside, but most of it has come from the inside. I've had to learn to overcome that because it's not easy when it comes from your brothers and sisters whom you're supposed to love and who are supposed to love you. But that's where you first learn to overcome.

Now though these churches were in quite a small circle, you could walk around it in a few days, the one thing he never says is, I advise you to go to the church down the road. There's an astonishing absence of that kind of advice. Now of course they didn't have automobiles in those days, but nevertheless it still applies.

Unfortunately, we've developed a kind of supermarket Christianity. If a church doesn't shoot us, suit us in our style, then we get in the car and we go down the road and we choose another. There are plenty to choose from.

There are three or four within two minutes' walking of this building. What a temptation that is to us to become supermarket Christians and choose a church that suits us. Jesus says to all these people, even to the worst church of the seven, he says, he who overcomes, he who stays right there but doesn't let the wrong things in the church get on top of him, he's the one I will reward.

You don't run away from bad situations, you endure and you overcome. That may be a little word from the Lord for somebody here, I don't know. Then finally he makes an appeal, finishes the letter off, if you've got ears then hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Now that saying is very common on Jesus' lips if you read the Gospels. After most of his parables, which were stories, and he never drew out the moral. He never said, now that story is to teach this.

He just told the story and then said, he that has ears to hear, let him hear. And what he means is this. You may have enjoyed the story, but have you heard it? I remember watching a mother with a rather rebellious little boy and she said to the boy, sit down, and he stood up.

And she said, sit down, and he still stood. Sit down, and he still stood. And she finally said, did you hear me? Of course he heard her.

But that phrase when she said, did you hear me, meant something far more than that. It meant, why did you not do something about it? And when Jesus said, let him that has ears, let him hear, he is really saying, did you hear me? What are you going to do about this? In other words, it's an RSVP. He's saying, I want a reply to this letter.

I want a response to what I've told you. Let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Now that is the outline of each letter except for one rather unusual thing.

Halfway through, after dictating three letters in this order, he suddenly reverses six and seven. In the last four letters, the appeal comes before the promise of reward and assurance. Did you notice that? Don't ask me to explain it, you'll have to ask him.

I can only assume that after dictating three letters he thought again and thought, you know it would be better if I just reversed those last two things and carried on with the other four letters. Who knows? But you need to just note that. Now then, let's take the synoptic view of these letters.

When we put them side by side we notice far more. For example, we notice that under the approval there are two churches he has nothing good to say. You may not notice that gap when you've just read the letter straight through, but put them side by side and it becomes terribly obvious.

The two of them have nothing good about them in Jesus' eyes. Listen, those two are the two most successful in human terms. They are the two biggest, they have the biggest offerings, they have the biggest congregations, and yet Jesus says, I wish I could find something to commend about you but I can't.

And then when he comes to accusation of what is wrong, again we notice there are two about whom there is nothing wrong in Jesus' sight. See the most important thing for you and me is to find out what Jesus thinks about the church we go to. Not what people think, not what the pastor thinks, not what the press think, but what Jesus thinks about the church.

And his opinion is usually very, very different from the world's opinion. We talk about successful churches and so often, particularly here in America, that means the numbers on the membership list, whether their membership is nominal or real or whatever, have got to be big to be successful. If I was asked what is the God of America, I'd say success, but I must be careful not to say more.

But it's got right into the church world too and we have our ideas as to what a successful church is. But that may not be Jesus' idea at all. Have you ever asked Jesus what he thinks of your church? May I commend to you what I call interrogatory prayer? I've seen many books on prayer, but I've never seen anyone talk about interrogatory prayer.

Intercessory prayer, yes, but interrogatory prayer is asking God questions. Do you ever do that and expect him to answer? I learned some years ago to practice this kind of prayer and to ask God in a situation, how do you feel about this? I was engaged in a public debate with a communist and he was aggressive and even abusive towards me publicly, but I just sent up a little ten-second prayer, Lord, how do you feel about that man? And do you know what? I burst into tears in front of everybody and I wept, and I realized Jesus wept over the whole state of his soul. Change my attitude towards him, because I can give as good as you get and I could have given him some real verbal punch-ups.

But when I asked Jesus what he felt, and he shared with me how he did feel, the whole debate changed. In fact, though it was a bunch of unbelieving students and staff in the university attending the debate, hundreds of them, well the Lord won the debate and the overwhelming vote was for the Lord at the end from a whole bunch of unbelievers. But that might not have happened if I hadn't asked that question.

And I assume when I ask God a question that the next thing that comes into my mind, however unexpected, is his answer. It's not always right. About eight or nine out of ten so far, I'm getting better at it.

And I make mistakes, but I assume he wants to talk to me. Ask God questions and expect an answer. And if you want to try this, here's the first question I suggest you ask.

Ask the Lord, is there anything in my life you don't like? Try asking that question and see if you get an answer from him. I told a lady to try this one. She said, I've never heard God speak to me.

I said, well just ask him this question, is there anything in my life you don't like? And she immediately said, I know what it'll be. And I said, no you don't. It might be something quite different.

You go and ask him. But next Sunday when she came to church she said, it was. But she'd never thought of asking God questions.

But when you read the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, they were always asking questions of God and expecting him to answer. Well, ask him what he thinks of your church. Try and find out, because that's the most important question about any church.

What does Jesus think about it? So there we have it. Now when you've got that little chart with all those letters side by side, this is what I did with it. I got some coloured pencils and I started filling in the colours of all the things that were the same, and a pattern began to emerge from this.

It's obvious, for example, that - sorry, I've got it upside down, haven't I? Oh, what's the matter? There we are. It's obvious that the first, to the angel of the church in, is identical wording all the way across. The only change is the place, the address changes.

Then these are the words of him who goes right across. But what follows those words changes for each church and fits their situation. Then he's constantly saying, I know, I know your deeds.

I know your afflictions. I know, I know your deeds. Can't you see that one? I know your deeds again.

There it is, every letter, I know, I know, I know. These things begin to emerge as important things that Jesus wants to say. And so on right to the end.

Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, that goes right the way through, though it changes places halfway through, and so on. I notice that there's more about Satan in these letters than the letters that Paul and John and Peter put together, because Jesus knew who his foe really was. He had battled Satan before, and so he mentions Satan frequently.

And I can't just see too clearly where it is, I put a different colour for Satan. And then I began to notice words like remember and words like repent. His advice was full of remember.

Remember what you used to be like, those of you who've lost your first love. Recall how you felt when you first fell in love with Jesus. What happened? Is the honeymoon over? Remember what it was like.

And in fact, he told Ephesus that the way to recapture your first love is to do the things you used to do when you first had that love. Isn't that interesting? Now that means that many men here will rush from this meeting and buy some flowers and some chocolates for their wives. See? Remember the things you used to do when you were in love.

It's a very simple bit of advice, but oh how wise it is. When you first fell in love with Jesus, what did you do about it? Then remember and go and do it again. To other churches he has to say very strongly, repent,

turn around, turn away from that, renounce it, cut it out, finish with it.

And repentance is not just saying, I'm sorry for all my sins. That's not repentance at all. I remember a young man coming to my front door once on a motorbike with handlebars up here and mirrors stuck out like a porcupine.

He was in leather, black leather, covered with brass metal studs. I think you know the kind of guy. There he was and he rang my front doorbell and I said, Hello Paul, what can I do for you? He said, I want to talk.

I said, come on in then. He sat down on our settee and the marks still show where he squirmed his brass jacket into the moquette cover. I said, what do you want to talk about, Paul? He said, I want to be baptized.

I said, good. But I said, Paul, do you know how we baptize people here? He said, yeah, you duck them in the water. I said, so you want to be ducked in the water? Right.

But I said, Paul, do you know what the word repent means? No. I said, well Paul, go home and ask Jesus, is there anything in my life you don't like? When he tells you, cut it out and come back. Three weeks later, I heard him coming for half a mile away.

There he is at the front door and I said, what is it Paul? He said, there. I said, what do you mean there? I've stopped biting my nails. So I said, Paul, I will now baptize you.

And I did. It showed me he repented. Paul said this, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision so I preached to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Many of you weren't even asked if you'd stop biting your nails when you were baptized. You were not asked for any proof of repentance, but that's the New Testament approach. You're baptized not on profession of faith but on proof of repentance in the New Testament.

Jesus here has to say to churches, repent. That doesn't mean feel sorry. It means change, turn around, get rid of what you're doing, walk away from it.

That's repentance, and boy what a need there is for repentance today. So that's his advice, and it comes out when you start adding these colours. Well you take that chart home and do a little homework on it for yourself.

I thought I'd talk about one or two of the churches now. We haven't time to go through it all, but I've made a video. It's on the bookstall just out there, or a few copies are.

Oh there it is, thank you, yes. This is Bob Harvey who distributes my tapes and videos in America, bless him. Here it is, Letters of Jesus to His Churches.

I believe this is a prophetic message for the church today as it prepares for the troubles that lie ahead. It's had a tremendous impact on many a church. Buy one for your church and play it to the house groups or whatever.

It goes through each letter in detail, and it also, we've put in the scenes that the film crew captured so you can go to the places and live in it. But I can't, we haven't time to go through each letter this morning. But

let me give you a little taste of some of them.

Here's that main street in Ephesus. It's magnificent even though it's in ruins now, and Hillary Clinton was walking just down here when they saw her. There's that magnificent library.

Along to the right is a huge theatre seating thousands of people, and I went into the theatre and I stood at the centre of the stage and our people went up and sat at the very back far away. I could just see them, and speaking in a normal voice without a microphone they heard every word. The acoustics were astonishing, but it was in that very theatre that there was a public riot when Paul was hauled before the populace and accused of attacking Diana of Ephesians.

I want to show you what they were talking about. This is Diana of the Ephesians. It was a huge statue forty feet high in the temple of Diana.

Originally called Artemis, she changed her name and became Diana in Roman mythology. Now why is she like this? It was because long ago a meteorite fell out of space, out of the sky, and fell on Ephesus. It was an extraordinary meteorite.

It was black and it was covered with knobs, which from one angle looked just like female breasts. From that meteorite they believed they had been visited by Diana, the Queen of Heaven. So they modelled this idol with all these knobs looking like breasts.

Of course it is a fertility symbol. Most pagan religion is concerned about the fertility of Mother Earth, and by the way, she doesn't exist. It's amazing how many people are talking about Mother Earth today, and I've never met the lady, but there we are.

There has been a lot of talk about this part. Some say it's actually a collection of bulls' testicles, and certainly the bull was an ancient symbol of fertility. Others say it's a bunch of grapes.

Whatever it is, what you worship you become like, and in fact Ephesus was a cesspit of sexual perversion as the result of worshipping Diana of the Ephesians. Now here's a lesson for us today. Paul never a word against Diana.

He was accused of doing so, but when the crowd was shouting, he attacks our goddess, the town clerk, bless him, stood up in front of the whole crowd and said, he hasn't. I will testify that he hasn't. What he had done was rob Diana of all her customers, and that's the way to go about cleaning things up.

Not to protest, but to take the customers away. They still sell today to tourists these little models of Diana, usually in plastic or something today, but then it was in silver. The silversmiths made a bomb out of it.

They really had a going trade. Everybody wanted to take home this ugly little goddess to worship, and now they've gone out of business after Paul had been preaching there and yet he never once preached against Diana. Isn't that interesting? But he took the customers away, because once you've found the real God you don't have anything to do with that kind of stuff.

So that's Ephesus, and you know it was a church that many good things going for it. They were orthodox in doctrine, they guarded their pulpit, they had zeal for the Lord, they were enthusiastic. It was a live, active church.

But Jesus said, you've lost your first love. Now I've got a question for you and we'll take a vote on it, all right? The question is, do you think they had lost their love for the Lord, or their love for each other, or their love for the lost? Let's take a vote on that. Have you got the question? Do you think they'd lost their love for the Lord, or for each other, or for the lost? Take a vote.

Who thinks they'd lost their love for the Lord? Could I see? Who thinks they'd lost their love for each other, and who thinks they'd lost their love for the lost? That's an interesting vote. You're all right, because if one of these loves begins to fade, the other two will fade too. They're all tied together.

You can't love the Lord without loving each other. John says in his letter, if you don't love your brother you're not loving the Lord, because the Lord is in you brother. So all this love is tied up together.

And there they were, a zealous church, an orthodox church, very careful about choosing preachers. Oh, they wanted everything right in the pulpit. They were zealous to do the work of the Lord, so much going for them.

But you know, without love it's all a waste of time. One of my favourite stories in the Bible is about poor old Peter. I have real sympathy with Peter, he had foot and mouth disease.

Every time he opened his mouth he put his foot in it, and there he was. He denied the Lord three times over a charcoal fire where he was warming himself in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the high priest. There is only one other charcoal fire mentioned in the New Testament, and it's after the resurrection when the disciples have gone back to Galilee.

Jesus has told them he'll meet them there and they've waited and waited and he hasn't turned up, and they're getting a bit fed up. So finally Peter says, I'm going fishing, I can't wait any longer, let's go fishing. They toiled all night and caught nothing.

In the morning as the sun came up - and by the way, I've spent a whole night on Galilee with the fishermen, I'll never forget it - but when the sun came up they saw someone standing on the shore and he said, you're doing it all wrong. Throw your net that way, not that way. Now here's a word of advice.

If ever you see a man fishing and he hasn't caught anything, he wants you to give him advice as to how he should do it. He will really welcome if you say, you're doing it all wrong, because he's so disappointed after working for hours and not catching anything that he will welcome any help at all. I'm afraid that's not true with fishermen.

And yet the amazing thing is, they said, well, we might as well try. And they caught a hundred and fifty-three fish. Now on the night I spent on Galilee with fishermen, when they threw their wide net they might catch five, ten at most, and then you throw it again.

A hundred and fifty-three? Unheard of. So do you know what the Bible commentators have done? They've tried to find a meaning to a hundred and fifty-three. And the most popular scholarly comment is that if you take the twelve apostles and square twelve, you get a hundred and forty-four.

And if you take the Trinity, which is three, and cube the Trinity, that's another nine, and a hundred and forty-four plus nine is a hundred and fifty-three, and they've got a sermon. I will tell you the real meaning of a hundred and fifty-three because I know the real meaning of that figure. The real meaning is, that's an awful lot of fish.

And then John said to Peter, it's the Lord, it must be. And Peter jumped into the water and splashed ashore and came face to face with a charcoal fire, and he immediately must have remembered the other charcoal fire. And Jesus had cooked breakfast for them.

Resurrection bodies can cook breakfast for un-resurrection bodies, incidentally, and fried some fish. Then he said, Peter, I've got a question I'd like to ask you. You've rather let me down, haven't you? I'd hoped to make you the first pastor of the church, but I think I'll have to... you can give out the hymn books at the door.

No, he didn't say that. Did he say, Peter, I'll put you on probation for a couple of years and we'll see how you turn out, and if you turn over a new leaf we'll reconsider your position as a pastor. And he didn't say, Peter, you'll have to go to purgatory for twenty-five years before you'll get to heaven.

What did he say? He said, Peter, do you love me? That's all he said, three times. And Peter refused to use the word love. He said, I'm very fond of you.

Oh, do you love me more than these others? You know I like you so much. Oh, you only like me? You know everything, Lord? I'm not going to lie to you. Then feed my sheep.

You see, Jesus is not interested in a live, active church that's doctrinally sound. That's not the big thing. It's how much do you love? That's what he's after.

My wife can put up with my mistakes and worse than that, things I do to hurt her if I've done it. She can put up with a lot of things provided she's sure that I love her. If that isn't true, the rest would loom enormously in problems.

My marriage would break up like everybody else's seems to be doing, but if she's sure that I love her she can cope with the rest. Now that's why Ephesus wasn't being persecuted from outside or corrupted from inside, it was just the love had gone. The other church I'll say a bit about is Laodicea.

Let's have a picture of Laodicea. Now that's not exactly what you expected I think, is it? Some of you may have been to this place in Turkey called Pamukkale. Pamukkale is a mountain range which for about three kilometres or two miles is pure white.

It looks as if it's permanently snow-capped and covered, but it's not. This is salt. There are hot springs because the earth's crust is very thin at Laodicea, very thin, and the rain goes through the crust and immediately touches the red-hot molten rock underneath and comes straight back up as hot steaming water.

It comes up full of salts of all kinds and chemicals and then it flows down the mountain and the salts gradually crystallise out until the whole mountain. I've never seen anything like it. It's just white, the whole mountain.

Of course, it's a tourist resort. You can get sunburned on both sides there because the sun comes back up from the white underneath you and the waters are just hot, beautiful. So you get tourists in swimming costumes all over Laodicea.

Now Laodicea itself is two miles away, but it has no springs of water. So the Romans built an aqueduct from here to take the water across two miles of countryside and there it supplied fountains, which you can

still see in the marketplaces, and running water for everybody. However, by the time it got to Laodicea it was lukewarm and if you drank it, it acted like an emetic.

It made you sick. You threw up if you drank that water and then it went on into the River Meander until it was cold. But at Laodicea the water was lukewarm and made you feel sick.

I've had that experience when I lived in Arabia. Our water came out of an artesian well through a natural deposit of Epsom salts, and you can imagine what it was like. We could either drink it boiling hot or we put it in the fridge and we drank it cold.

But if we drank it as it was, lukewarm, we were sick too. We had to mix it with all kinds of cordial to get the taste out of it. I can understand all this.

And Jesus knew about their water supply. Jesus said to Laodicea, you make me sick. I will spew you out of my mouth.

Why? Because they were a warm church. Jesus said, I can cope with you when you're hot. I'd even rather you were stone cold about me.

But lukewarm, half-heartedness, that's an insult to the Lord. Yet I've noticed that churches prefer to describe themselves as warm these days. We pride ourselves on being a warm fellowship.

We give you a warm welcome. Have you heard talk like this, you know? What we should say, we're a hot fellowship and we give you a hot welcome and we preach the hot gospel here. But lukewarmness, to be half-hearted and not sold out on the Lord, that is an insult.

But there are plenty of lukewarm churches around. The trouble is that Laodicea was a very rich place. It was the centre of the fur coat trade.

Special black wool was used to make special coats which sold well. It was the centre of a pharmaceutical industry that produced ointment for eyes. And because it was rich, it was a banking centre where you changed your traveller's cheques.

The money trading went on in Laodicea because of course it was where the two roads, the inland and the coast road, met again to go to the other continents. It was fabulously wealthy and of course there were loads of beggars who came along and lined the streets hoping to get a coin from the rich people in their fur coats as they passed. Unfortunately, the church reflected the situation.

They had big congregations, big collections, people turned up in their finest fur coats for the service. There was only one thing wrong with the church. Jesus never attended it.

He was completely out of it. He was outside the church and they didn't know it. You know, a church can have big congregations, big collections and never know that Jesus has stopped attending the services and meetings.

Amazing, but it happens. And Jesus wrote to them and said, you think you're rich? In my sight you're desperately poor, you're a beggar. You think you can see? To me you're blind and you need to come to me for eye ointment to open your eyes so you can see your real condition.

Then he said a word to them which is the most abused and misquoted text in the whole New Testament. He said, behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door I'll come in and sup with him and he with me.

That has nothing to do with becoming a Christian. It has nothing to do with conversion. It should never be used in counselling and enquiry, but I'm afraid evangelists the world over quote that.

The door in that word is the door of a church and it's Jesus who's knocking at a church full of believers. It is a word not to unbelievers but to believers who've lost Jesus from their church. It's a beautiful promise.

It takes only one member of that church to get me back inside it. Isn't that a beautiful word? Just one person who realises that Jesus has left the church who will go and open the door and say, Jesus, please come back into our church. He didn't say, I'll come back to the whole church, but he said, I'll come back to that person and I'll sup with him.

Perhaps a reference to the Lord's Supper so that when that person took the Lord's Supper they would know Jesus was with them and it would be truly communion. Well that's how the verse ought to be understood, but alas it's not. One of the most famous paintings in the world is in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, but it's been reproduced the world over.

Have any of you seen this picture, I Am the Light of the World? No, it's the wrong way round. Let's put it the other way round. Any of you seen that picture? Yes, quite a few.

It was painted by a man called Holman Hunt. I'm afraid I'm going to spoil the painting for you, but it was painted by a man called Holman Hunt who was quite a mixed character and he chose three girls to model Christ for him. One girl modelled the hair for him, another the face, and the other the figure dressed up in bishop's robes.

It was painted in an orchard not far from where I live where there's an old barn with a door that you can't open. Holman Hunt thought, Revelation 3.20 is a lovely verse, I'm going to paint it. Behold I stand at the door knock.

He thought the door was the door of the human heart and that it had no handle on the outside and can only be opened from the inside. Oh, preachers have used this all over the world, but it's very misleading. You see, it's patronising.

We don't invite Jesus in. We're not saying, we'll give room for you in our hearts. That's not the way round at all.

The sinner is knocking at the door of the kingdom and it's Jesus who decides to let him in. In fact, Jesus is the door itself, he said that. We should never use this to counsel unbelievers.

It doesn't mention repentance, it doesn't mention baptism, it doesn't mention receiving the Holy Spirit. It's totally inadequate to counsel someone into the kingdom. But Holman Hunt painted another picture and I love his other picture of Jesus.

Here it is. That's the other picture he did of our Lord Jesus. I'll make it bigger so that you can see it.

Do you recognise Jesus? If you know the book of Leviticus you do. Leviticus 16, once a year the Jews took a goat and they laid their hands on its head and confessed their sins and then they drove it out of

Jerusalem and it had to wander away into the Judean wilderness where it died near the Dead Sea. That was a type or prefiguring, a foreshadowing of Jesus who would take away the sins of the people outside Jerusalem.

Holman Hunt went and camped by the shores of the Dead Sea for two years to paint this picture, a very dangerous thing to do because bandits controlled the country in those days. And he camped alone and there he is looking over the salt Dead Sea to the mountains of Moab. That's Mount Nebo where Moses died with his last glimpse of the Holy Land, and here is Machairas where John the Baptist had his head cut off to please a dancing girl.

It's full of memories, this place. And he has painted this goat. Even the eyes speak of Jesus' compassion.

And the goat is dying, weighted down with the sins of the people, and there's last year's goat or the remains of it behind. I find that picture very moving. It's in a private collection so it's not on public view, but he'd seen something more I think here.

Do you know that in the year that Jesus died, the Jews will tell you this, the scapegoat came back into Jerusalem and brought all the sins of the people back. They didn't get rid of them that way that year because now we don't need a scapegoat. We've got Jesus who's done this for us.

Well, that's Laodicea. I have one more picture to show you. It's a painting in Scotland and not easy for you to see from here.

It's the inside, the dark interior of a cathedral which is brilliantly lit at the far end where all the priests are at the altar and where everything's happening. Here people are sitting looking to that brilliantly lit end. But way at the back here is a woman kneeling, she's weeping, she's confessing her sins.

She doesn't feel worthy to join the rest of the congregation or to go any nearer to the priests at the front. But when you look at the picture carefully, and I'm sorry this is a poor reproduction, it's the only one I could make, but it's such a lovely picture. The figure of Jesus is at the back of the cathedral with a woman.

He's supping with one person and she with him. She's got him into the cathedral through her prayer. I love that picture.

Well, that's the letter to Laodicea. I'll leave this one up for you to copy if you wish. It's a summary of the seven churches, their character according to Jesus.

Ephesus, loyal but loveless. Smyrna, afflicted but affluent. They were persecuted and poor but Jesus said to me, you're rich, rich in faith, rich in loyalty.

Pergamum, faithful but terribly flawed. There was dreadful immorality. A woman prophetess was encouraging people to have sex in the name of Jesus with people they were not married to.

Always been one of the weaknesses in the church. Thyatira, committed but compromised. They were always starting things for Jesus but never getting them finished.

Sardis, dynamic but dying. They had the reputation of being a live church but Jesus knew they were actually dying on their feet and were on the way out. Philadelphia, small but significant.

I've opened a door before you that nobody can shut. You're a church with great opportunity. And finally, Laodicea, crowded but Christless.

When we meet together this afternoon we'll talk about how to apply these letters to our churches today. How do we learn from them? What do we do with them? But I'm ready for lunch and so are some of you. Some of you are fasting but we're all ready to leave.

So let's pray. We remember Lord Jesus that you said, I will build my church. Forgive us if we think that we build it.

It's your church. It belongs to you. Forgive us if we've ever talked about my church or even our church and teach us to say, his church.

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The church is yours and therefore we thank you that one day the church will be complete and successful in the right way because you are building it by your Holy Spirit. Thank you for what we've learned in this session, but may it remain with us.

May we take it to heart and may we realize that you are constantly walking among the churches and looking at the churches and that you know everything about us and to you be the glory and the praise and the honour forever and ever. Amen. For more information on Friends of the Bridegroom, visit our website at www.fotv.com

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