

(The Lord and His Church) 11. Arresting the Downward Trend

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of self-judgment, the call to overcome, and the need to discern the true church in order to live a life that is pleasing to God and to radiate the glory of the Lord.

Scripture: Revelation 2:1

Topics: "Faithfulness in the Church", "Self-Evaluation"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of self-evaluation within the church, highlighting the downward trends seen in the five backslidden churches of Revelation. He warns against complacency and the dangers of losing one's first love for Christ, which leads to worldliness, hypocrisy, and spiritual decay. Poonen contrasts these with the faithful churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, which exemplify perseverance and faithfulness amidst trials. He calls on believers to judge themselves constantly to avoid the fate of the backslidden and to seek fellowship with churches that uphold the true testimony of Christ. Ultimately, he encourages the pursuit of being overcomers who reflect the glory of the Lord.

Transcript

The seven messengers and churches that we have looked at are pictures of seven types of messengers and churches that have been in existence in all these 20 centuries. These seven types of messengers and churches are existing in the world even today. Each of us can evaluate ourselves and see where we stand.

The Backslidden Messengers and Churches

When we look at the five messengers and churches that are rebuked by the Lord we see in them a definite downward trend:

In Ephesus, we see the loss of first love for the Lord. When we lose our devotion for Christ, we have taken the first step downwards. In a little while, this leads on to our losing our love for our fellow-believers too.

In Pergamum, we see that worldliness has crept in slyly through the teaching of Balaam. The Nicolaitans (who were kept out of the church at Ephesus) have now got power here. When devotion to Christ is lost, worldliness creeps in and the religious hierarchy takes over the church. Once a religious hierarchy has

taken over the leadership of a church, Babylon is built easily.

In Thyatira, the church has become thoroughly worldly, and as a result religious harlotry is rampant. A woman now has power to influence the church, and is proclaiming false grace and counterfeiting the gifts of the Spirit too (prophecy in particular).

In Sardis, we see hypocrisy. Sin is covered up and man's opinion is valued more than God's. The messenger of the church is spiritually asleep (unaware of spiritual realities). The form of godliness however hides from the eyes of men the spiritual death that the Lord sees in him.

In Laodicea, things have degenerated to such an extent that the body has not only died, but also begun to decay and stink. Lukewarmness and spiritual pride are the cause of the death. In the above four churches, there was something good that the Lord could still see in each of them. But here in Laodicea He could see nothing.

None of the messengers of the above churches were aware of the true spiritual condition of their own lives or of their churches. All of them were complacent because of the high opinion they had of themselves. They could not hear what the Lord had to say to them personally, because they were all busy preparing sermons to preach to others. They were more interested in preaching than in seeing their own need.

It is very easy, once a person has become the messenger of a church, to imagine that he himself is beyond the need for correction. The Bible speaks of "an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction" (Ecclesiastes 4:13).

The messengers of these five churches were all like that foolish king. Their word had been law for so long that they could not even imagine the possibility of their now being wrong in any matter!! Such was their deluded state. They imagined that they could never lose the anointing of God from their lives. Their proud attitude was what made them spiritually deaf.

King Saul was another foolish king who had started out well but who fell by the wayside very soon. He was "little in his own eyes" when he was first anointed by the Lord as king (1 Samuel 15:17). But he did not keep himself in low thoughts about himself. And so he lost the anointing of God. The anointing then moved on to young David. Saul realised this, but he refused to face up to it. He stubbornly continued to sit on his throne and sought to kill David. Finally, God took away Saul's life and put David on the throne.

We see similar situations in many churches today. The anointing of the Spirit has departed from many who were once the Lord's messengers, and is now resting powerfully on some younger brothers in their churches. But the "old and foolish kings" cannot bear to see this. So what do they do? Their jealousy and their selfish desire to preserve their kingdoms prompts them to suppress those young brothers in one way or the other.

Perhaps something similar may have been happening in the five backslidden churches of Asia Minor as well. So the Lord gave those messengers one last warning.

There is no partiality with God and He has no special favourites. Even the apostle Paul realised that he could fall away and be disqualified if he was not careful to live a disciplined life (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Paul told Timothy,

"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." (1 Timothy 4:16).

Timothy had to watch over his own life first of all. He would then be able to experience salvation from un-Christlikeness in his own life and thus be enabled to lead others to such a salvation as well. This is the way the Lord has appointed for all His messengers in every church.

Paul told the elders of the church in Ephesus also to watch their own lives first of all and then the lives of their flock (Acts 20:28).

This is the responsibility of every messenger of the Lord - to preserve his own life first of all in purity and under the constant anointing of the Spirit. "Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head." (Ecclesiastes 9:8).

The Lord had wanted to speak to these messengers directly. But they did not have listening ears. Finally He had to speak to them through an apostle. Thank God that there was at least a John who could hear the Lord's voice clearly.

In spite of their failures however, the Lord had hope for all five messengers - for He still held them all in His right hand (Revelation 2:1). If they repented, they could become glorious brothers once again. And their churches could radiate the glory of the Lord once more. If however they failed to heed this last warning, then the Lord would cast them off.

The Faithful Messengers and Churches

In the midst of all this degeneration, there were two wonderful messengers and churches (at Smyrna and at Philadelphia) against whom the Lord had no charge at all.

In them we see the virtues of:

faithfulness in the midst of poverty and opposition;

perseverance in obedience to God's Word; and

proclaiming the testimony of Christ unashamedly.

The Lord had to rebuke and correct the five backslidden messengers and their churches because they had not judged themselves.

The two faithful messengers and their churches did not need any rebuke, because they were constantly judging themselves and cleansing themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit (2 Corinthians 7:1).

God's Word says,

"If we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged." (1 Corinthians 11:31).

"It is time for judgment to begin with the household of Godit begins with US FIRST." (1 Peter 4:17).

This is the identifying mark of the true house of God that we judge ourselves FIRST and CONSTANTLY.

The Lord gives us the privilege of judging ourselves now, so that when we stand at His judgment-seat one day, there will be nothing left to be judged in our lives. That is why it is important for us to read and meditate on God's Word with an attitude of self-judgment. Thus we too can be among those in whom the Lord finds nothing to rebuke or correct.

The Overcomers

In the messages to every one of these churches is a call to individual believers to overcome. Overcomers are those who arrest the downward trend (that we have seen above) in their own life, and thus radiate the glory of the Lord. They recognise that they have the same flesh with the same evil tendencies to backslide that are found in others around them. But they stand against those tendencies and crucify them in the power of the Spirit.

What should overcomers do today? Should they stay in the dead churches that they find themselves in, or should they come out?

In the letters to the seven churches in "Revelation", we find no command to the overcomers to leave their local churches. But that was because there was ONLY ONE CHURCH in each locality. And the Lord had not yet removed the lampstand from any of them.

The situation is very different today. There are many "churches" in our towns and cities these days. But we cannot call all of these the lampstands of the Lord, for in most cases the Lord never founded them. Their messengers were never stars in the Lord's hand at any time, because He never called them or appointed them to eldership.

In many other cases the Lord has given up both messenger and church long ago, because of their refusal to repent. So we need discernment to see whether the "anointing" of the Lord is on a messenger and a church before deciding to become a part of that church.

Overcomers must certainly not become a part of any local "church" that does not proclaim "the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27).

The messenger at Ephesus was warned that if he did not repent, the Lord would remove the lampstand out of its place (Revelation 2:5). What would have happened if the messenger had NOT repented? The Lord would have set him aside as His messenger and appointed someone else.

What would have happened if the church at Ephesus also had NOT repented? The church would have been set aside and thus become one that was unrecognised by the Lord. They would no doubt still have continued as a congregation - but only as a Babylonian "church" thereafter, in the Lord's eyes.

What would the overcomers in Ephesus have done then?

They would have pulled out of the old "church" as soon as the Lord pulled out of it. And they would have started gathering separately. Those who had eyes to see the moving of the Lord away from the old system to the new church would then have gathered together with these overcomers. That new gathering would then have become the church at Ephesus - for the Lord would have placed His lampstand in their midst.

If at any time this new church now refused to walk in the ways of God or to judge itself, then the Lord would have had to remove the lampstand from their midst and start all over again. There is no partiality

with God.

The history of the Christian church shows how this process has been repeated over and over again in every part of the world, during these past twenty centuries. This is why we now find so many Babylonian "churches" in every place. It can become so bad at one stage that there is no lampstand left in a city at all. Every so-called church can be a Babylonian one.

We must in any case, never stay in a "church" after the Lord Himself has pulled out of it. Our loyalty must always be to the Lord and to His church - not to "the church we grew up in". Human attachments can hinder us from moving on with the Lord.

From our study of these seven churches, we have seen clearly what it is that the Lord looks for in a church. And so, overcomers must seek to fellowship with a church in their locality :

that burns with devotion to Christ and love for one another;

that preaches a living faith in God;

that emphasises total obedience to all of God's commandments;

that proclaims the testimony of Jesus unashamedly;

that stands against spiritual pride, hypocrisy and worldliness;

that exposes false apostles, false teachers and false gifts;

that constantly preaches the crucifixion of the flesh;

that encourages all believers to judge themselves constantly; and

that challenges believers to be overcomers, like Jesus Himself was.

The Lord desires such a testimony to His Name in every place.

To build such churches, the Lord needs messengers who are gripped by the truths that we have considered in this book.

May the Lord find many such men and many such churches in every part of the world in these last days. Amen.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/zac-poonen/the-lord-and-his-church-11-arresting-the-downward-trend/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net