

REVEALED

Part Two: The Seven Churches

Revelation 1:19-3:22

1. Ephesus

- *John 13:34-35*

2. Smyrna

3. Pergamum

- *2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Numbers 22:5-24:25, 31:16; Exodus 16:33; Philipians 2:9*

4. Thyatira

- *1 Kings 16:31*

5. Sardis

6. Philadelphia

- *John 17:15*

7. Laodicea

- *Luke 12:19*

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
5/29/16

**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Two: The Seven Churches¹
Revelation 1:19-3:22**

How many of you, like me, try to stay up to date with the news these days by reading the paper and watching the news, either on television or online or all of the above? If you've been watching, you've seen a steady decline in good things and a steady incline in some bad things.

In the political arena, we've seen a decline in civility as the lines between parties are getting drawn so deeply that debate is now filled with hatred, horrible language, and even violence. We've seen common decency give way to rudeness and vitriol. We've seen a rise in societal ills like the legalization of recreational drugs, increased violence, racism, abuse of power, human trafficking, and rampant abortion. We've seen the rise of violent religious extremism to the point of nations declaring war not against other nations but against radical groups.

Each election year we hope to get leaders who will have a plan to protect us, strengthen us, and lead the world. But this election year we seem to have stirred the political pot so much that the sludge at the bottom is rising to the top, so that instead of an election of leaders; we've got a reality TV show full of characters: one part Apprentice, another part America's Most Wanted, and one part "America's Got Socialists."

So as I was praying about what the sermon series should be for this summer, I had all of these things in mind. I wondered about addressing how we can live our lives as Christians in this culture. I wondered how we could stay faithful to Christ and grow as a church in this culture. As the pastoral team discussed this, we began to think of a time in history when the church faced far worse circumstances than we are today but still stood strong and emerged victorious. We thought of a time that is recorded for us in the book of Revelation.

How do we as individuals and the church live as devoted disciples of Christ in this turbulent culture? The Book of Revelation offers an answer to this question. Many avoid Revelation because it seems like a confusing book of cryptic messages that elude or even frighten us. However, when we read it as it was intended, it provides inspiration and application to our Christian lives.

¹ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO), Peter Davids, *More Hard Sayings of the New Testament* (1991, IVP, Downer's Grove, IL) pp. 244-252. Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 2:12-17* (NNU, 2015), George Lyons, *Commentary on Revelation 2 & 3*, Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis), Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (2013, Thomas Nelson, Nashville), Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

Last week I spent a great deal of time laying out the groundwork for how we will approach this series and what our perspective is going to be throughout it. If you weren't with us, I'd encourage you to check it out. We said that there are three components of the book of Revelation (remember?) Apocalyptic, epistle, and wisdom. That means that we will unpack and explain what some of the mysterious symbols mean (and what they DON'T mean, according to today's popular theology), we will gain instruction for us as a church, and we will also be challenged to obey what it tells each of us individually.

You have a part in this journey; we are asking you to read the Scripture passages on your own beforehand, so we've given you a reading chart of the passages we will explore each week. We've asked you to spend time meditating on the passage by asking yourself the three questions listed – these will allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you in advance. We've also invited you to submit questions you have about Revelation, so we can try to answer them either in the sermons or in a Q&A Sunday at the very end.

Hopefully you have come prepared today to discuss the seven letters to the seven churches. If not, I'd encourage you to read through the passage when you get home.

There are seven churches listed specifically by name and each are given specific messages from Jesus. The listing of those seven churches is not haphazard; they are arranged so that a messenger could carry the scroll beginning with Ephesus, which was the leading city of the region, and then travel in a circular route north to Smyrna and Pergamum and then head south through Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each of these churches had a long, complicated history, and there is no clear evidence why *these* specific seven churches were chosen (there were many more churches in the world by that time – near the end of the first century). None of the seven churches exist today. But one thing we know for sure: these churches represent ALL churches, including ours. We know this because there are (how many churches?) seven, and the number seven represents what? Completeness. The fact that the churches are listed in a circular route also tells us that they are intended to represent all churches, so they speak to us at West Valley Church. One other thing I should point out: within in the last few decades, some have suggested that these seven churches each represent an age in the history of churches, and that we are the last "age" – the age of Laodicea. There is nothing in the original language that gives any indication of that idea – at all.

The section starts out with the statement, "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." (Revelation 2:1, niv) Literally it is "these things says the Lord," which introduces a prophetic declaration. Remember last week that I said that Revelation is not so much "fore-telling," as in "telling the future," as it is about "forth-telling," which is "declaring God's Word." Revelation's primary purpose is to reveal God's love and his plans to restore creation, not to disguise hidden secrets about end times events. This section becomes with *that* declaration.

There are some common things that Jesus says to each church. One of those is **“I know”** as in, “I know your deeds,” or “I know about you.” The point is that Jesus knows each and every church personally and intimately, including West Valley Church – this one. He knows all about our church!

Also, each letter incorporates some element of **the description of Jesus in chapter one**. Each component of Jesus’ description fits the strength or the weakness of each church.

There is also something else that each church is told, and that is a command to **hear the Spirit**. We can – and must – listen to the Spirit. Jesus Christ himself speaks to our church and to each of us individually through the Holy Spirit. This is an amazing reminder throughout this passage – that Jesus Christ, God himself, speaks to us through the Spirit in our church and our lives.

One of the fascinating questions about this passage is why each letter is addressed to **the “angel” of the particular churches**. Scholars have figured out that there are three possibilities:

- 1) The Greek word for “angel” is the same word for “messenger,” so it could mean that the letters are simply addressed to the messenger or pastor at each congregation. But this isn’t a strong possibility, because the message in the letter is not addressed only to the leaders of the churches but to the whole church. So it’s not that one.
- 2) A second possibility is that the angel is a spiritual entity that has either been assigned by God to care for each congregation (as in a guardian angel) or it’s an evil entity that has taken control of each church (as in a demonic being). But that doesn’t fit the context, and the term is never used that way anywhere else in Scripture.
- 3) So the majority of NT scholars offer a third alternative, which is much more likely. Remember, Revelation has many metaphors that mean things. The word “angel” is to be taken metaphorically as a way of describing the ‘ethos’ or ‘spirit’ or the ‘attitude’ of each church. A community of individuals takes on a unique “ethos” or spirit that is more than the sum of its parts. The letters are addressed to all of the people who make up the church at each place, but the Lord wants to address the “ethos” or spirit that is emerging from their life together.² Does that make sense? So for instance, West Valley Church has a certain ethos, or spirit, that identifies our community. What do you think might be some of the words to describe our church’s “ethos”?

(Allow time for people to come up with words)

Now let’s look at each church as they are listed, we’ll highlight what’s most important, and clear up any mysteries as best we can, starting with...

² Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation*
(<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

1. Ephesus

This city was located at the mouth of a major river from the Aegean Sea, so it was an important commercial, political, and religious center. It had a population of about 250,000, which made it one of the largest in the known world. They were really big into the worship of Rome. The official religion of the Roman world was emperor worship, or the worship of Caesar. All the gods of mythology supported the idea that people should worship the emperor. That makes it convenient to enforce loyalty from the people if your king or president is also endorsed as a “god” by the “gods.” This is *all* through Revelation; we will see Emperor Worship lots of times. Ephesus had five temples dedicated to emperor worship. They also had a temple for the Roman goddess Diana. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. For Christians, Ephesus was important because the Apostle Paul himself started and strengthened the church, visiting there and teaching there several times.

Jesus tells them that he knows their “**deeds**” – this is a word that will appear often, so make note of this. By this, Jesus means their general behavior as a church, or the way they lived as a community of believers.

I’ll give you a head’s up here, too: Jesus follows a pattern; he commends each church for the good things they are doing (except for one that has no commendation), and then he corrects or rebukes them for the bad things they are doing (except for two). Then he tells them repent, to obey, and gives them a promise.

For Ephesus, Jesus knows that they work hard, they don’t tolerate evil people in the church, they don’t allow false teaching. They persevere in hardships and they haven’t grown weary.

Then he corrects or rebukes them because they have “**forsaken their first love.**” By this Jesus means they have forgotten their love for him. And because they don’t love Jesus as much as they used to, they don’t love each other as much as they used to. And so their witness to the culture around them has diminished because that’s how the world would know they are Christians – in the way they love each other, which comes from their love for the Lord (John 13:34-35). This is still a principle for the church today, too. Because they don’t love Jesus or each other, they have “fallen” – Jesus says that they are a moral and spiritual failure. Have you ever known a church that didn’t love Jesus or each other? Seems crazy, but there are many churches like that.

Jesus said that if they didn’t repent and change, he would remove their lampstand; in other words, they would no longer be a church. What is the purpose of a lamp on a lampstand? To give light! Ephesus was no longer the light of the world, because they stopped loving. Listen folks: our light is our love! No love, no light. No love, no church.

Then Jesus mentions a group of people that comes up a couple of times and might be sort of a mystery, so let me explain: I’m talking about the Nicolaitans. We don’t know much about them, other than that they followed some false teaching by someone named Nicolas. They claimed to have secret insight into God that no one

else had. They claimed that they discovered certain mysteries that were hidden in the Bible that no one else had found. Whatever their teaching was, it included sexual immorality and compromise with the culture around them. As a result of their false teaching, they lured people away from the One True God. A church that compromises with the culture around them is a very big deal to Jesus.

Next is...

2. Smyrna

Smyrna as a city claimed to be “the first in Asia in both beauty and size.” They were about 100,000. They had the largest public theater and were the first city to erect a temple to Rome, among other temples, including one to the head of the Roman Gods, Zeus. Their claim to be the “first” is probably why Jesus told them he was “the First and the Last.” The city was destroyed in 600 BC, and 300 years later was completely rebuilt. This is also why Jesus referred to himself as the one “who died and came to life again.” Whatever they took pride in as a city, Jesus reminded them of his sovereignty over them.

Jesus knows about the church in Smyrna; he knows that they are really poor. This isn't a spiritual metaphor; they were actually destitute and had to beg for food and money. To be a citizen in Smyrna, you had to belong to a trade guild, and most of the trade guilds were centered around worship of Rome. The Christians would not do that, so the citizens would not let them have jobs. No work, no income. The Christians were hated by the society of the city. So Jesus recognized that even though they were poor materialistically, they were rich spiritually. And they've managed to stay faithful despite being next door to what Jesus called “the synagogue of Satan.”

Have you ever had a bad neighbor? Taylor Ostergaard and Linsey Zellitti wanted to bless their neighbors. On July 31, 2004, the two teenage girls decided to bake cookies for their neighbors rather than attend a school dance.

After baking the cookies, the girls set out late that evening. They left the fresh-baked goods only at houses with the lights on. It was 10:30 p.m. when they pounded on the door of one home. The 49-year-old woman inside didn't answer the door, but she did experience an anxiety attack over the late-night visit. After a trip to the emergency room the next day, the woman decided to sue the girls. And she won.

The judge awarded the neighbor lady \$900 to cover the emergency room visit. The woman said she wanted the girls to learn a lesson, because they should not have been out late at night running from door to door. “Something bad could have happened to them,” she said (like getting sued!).

Thankfully, after the story was published in the *Denver Post*, hundreds of readers were outraged that the girls were sued for dropping off a plate of cookies and a paper heart for their neighbors. Thousands of dollars poured in to help the girls pay their fine. Their story was reported on national news programs, and the girls

appeared on Good Morning America. As a result of the publicity, a fund was been set up for the girls' college expenses.³

I don't know if you've had a "neighbor from hell," but the church in Smyrna did – literally! Jesus mentions this with the next church, too. What is he talking about? He could mean the Temple to the Emperor, or the Temple to Zeus, or even the synagogue of the hostile Jews. We don't know for sure, but what we do know is this: whatever it was, it claimed to be a rival to the Throne of Jesus Christ.

The church in Ephesus struggled also with a fear about the suffering that they were going to face. But Jesus reminded them that it would only be for "ten days." We don't know specifically what Jesus meant by that. It could mean either a short while, or for the short span that is our lifetime. Either way, Jesus is pointing out that it is only temporary in light of eternity.

I remember when I had my car accident, and my head was split open from front to back. It really started to hurt! I kept telling myself, "It's alright – pain is only temporary. It's only temporary. I can endure it." Whether it was a few hours, days, or even the rest of my years, it wouldn't be forever. That's what Jesus is telling the church in Ephesus.

The third church is...

3. Pergamum

This city of Pergamum was not a commercial center like the other two, but it was a religious center. There was an altar to Zeus there. On that altar, the priests burned human sacrifices 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There were also temples to other main gods. Pergamum also boasted one of the greatest libraries in the world and was world famous for making books. Jesus probably emphasized his own words in direct opposition to their books and self-important knowledge.

Also, here again is a reference to Satan's throne. There are plenty of obvious possibilities as to what this was, but the bottom line was it claimed to be a rival to Christ's Throne.

The opposition to the church in Pergamum was so great that someone was martyred – a guy named Antipas. Revelation says a lot about martyrs, but he is the only one mentioned by name. It's interesting that the word "martyr" didn't come to mean "someone who dies" until about 200 years later. At the time Revelation was written, "martyr" meant someone who was a faithful witness, even to the death. This is a very important theme in Revelation, because all throughout it warns about the temptation to compromise or abandon their faith for the sake of physical or temporary comfort. We are encouraged to be faithful witnesses, even if it means to the death.

³ Mike Lundberg, Montrose, Colorado; source: *Electa Draper, Denver Post (2-4-05 and 2-6-05)*

There is an interesting juxtaposition here: Antipas dies in Pergamum, and Satan “lives” in Pergamum. Jesus is pointing out that *true* life comes by dying to self – sometimes even physically if that’s what it takes to be a faithful witness.

There are also false teachers there (here come the Nicolaitans again). In Ephesus the false teachers were *outside* the church trying to get in; in Pergamum they are already *in*. Jesus also mentions another false teacher named Balaam – a reference to the Old Testament Balaam, which represents anyone who causes Christians to stumble and turn away (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Numbers 22:5-24:25, 31:16). The person was probably not actually named Balaam; it was a metaphor for what the person was doing. *They* claimed to have hidden truth, but *Christ* offered “hidden manna,” referring to the bread in the Exodus story that was hidden in the Ark of the Covenant and placed in the Temple (Exodus 16:33).

Then Jesus said if the church in Pergamum stayed faithful, he’d give them a “white stone with a new name written on it.” This is one of those things that would’ve made sense to the original readers, but that has been lost to us – we just don’t know for sure what it means. This is going to happen more than once as we go through Revelation, and we’ve got to learn to accept it. Here’s our best guess: the stone could be like a type of token that was given as a ticket for admittance to something, like the theater. In this case, it would be admittance into the wedding banquet feast of the Lamb in heaven. The new name could either be the Christian’s new name as a new creation, or it could be Jesus’ “name that is above every name.” (Philippians 2:9).

The fourth church is...

4. Thyatira

There’s not much that’s known today about the church. The city itself was known for its many trade guilds. They also had Temples to two of the gods who were sons of Zeus, which could be why Jesus refers to himself here as the Son of God.

This church is commended for their good deeds, which are listed specifically as love, faith, service, and perseverance. The word “service” meant literally, “serving at a table.” They served each other. True Christian fellowship means mutual service! (*repeat*) I remember once as a brand new Christian, I went to a Christian bookstore, and I ran into a guy from my church that I sort of knew. He started chatting with me about the weather, sports, things like that. At the end, as he was leaving, he said, “It was nice fellowshiping with you.” Even as a new Christian, I didn’t think he was using that word right. And he wasn’t. Fellowship is not just about talking or even worshipping together. True fellowship is about serving each other.

Jesus condemned the church for tolerating someone named “Jezebel.” That probably wasn’t her name, and she may not have even been a person, as much as she was a metaphor for false teaching that was luring them away from God. Jezebel was a woman in the Old Testament who did that to King Ahab (1 Kings 16:31). Because this false teaching included participating in sexual immorality, Jesus said she would be cast out on a bed of suffering – poetic justice for the type of sin she

was guilty of. (Do I need to explain that more?) She would suffer, and so would her followers, as a consequence for a life turned against God.

Jesus' encouragement to the church in Thyatira is to "hold on," to be *faithful witnesses*. Jesus says he will give them the "morning star" as a reward – he is referring to himself. Those who persevere and remain faithful to Jesus will get to be with him now and forever!

Next is...

5. Sardis

This city was very rich, famous for its gold and silver. The city was overconfident and arrogant, but turned out to be very easily overthrown. They had temples to major gods, and also had the largest and richest Jewish synagogue.

I need to explain what Jesus meant when he said that he holds the seven spirits in his hand. This is not the same "seven-fold Spirit" from chapter one; this means the spirits, or angels, or ethos, or attitudes of the seven churches. In other words, Jesus holds all the churches in his hand – including us.

The church in Sardis got *no* commendation; Jesus had nothing good to say and went straight to rebuking them. That's how bad they were. He says that they have an attitude of overconfidence, just like the city. Their reputation was for being alive, but spiritually they were dead. Jesus told them to wake up – to be alert.

I've got to tell you a story that this reminds me of. One summer during college I was a youth ministry intern at a church in Lakewood, Colorado. The youth pastor I worked for wanted to take the teens to "Worlds of Fun" – an amusement park in Kansas City. We left right after the teens got out of school on a Friday, and drove the eight hours or so, got a few hours of sleep, and went the park all day. But the lead pastor said we had to be back for church on Sunday, so after a few hours of sleep and all day at the park in 100 degree weather and humidity, we had to drive all night to get back to church. I got back in town, showered, and went straight to church – after driving 16 hours, spending 8 hours running around in 100 degrees, and getting only four hours of sleep in the last 48 hours. At this church, they had all the chairs lined up on the platform, and all the staff had to sit in those chairs – like the pastor was the king and we were his court. So I had to sit up in front of the whole church – about 600 people. As you can guess, I fell asleep! I woke up to people laughing. The pastor was preaching with his back to me, and apparently, not knowing I had fallen asleep, he happened to say, "As Christians, we are people who need to be awake and alert!"

I was a living metaphor for the church of Sardis – they needed to be awake and alert! Jesus reminded them that he could return at any moment, so they needed to be ready. If they were faithful, he said they wouldn't be "blotted out." (Jesus was referring to the ancient practice of erasing the name of a condemned person from the city's citizenship roster.) But Jesus said if they were faithful witnesses, he would "acknowledge" their name. This was like a public honor roll reading.

I remember as a high schooler, I played baseball, basketball, and football. In baseball and basketball, we had tryouts. That meant some would make it and some would get cut. On a certain day, the names were listed on a bulletin board, and we'd all crowd around. There was such shame if your name wasn't listed, but there was great pride and honor if your name was listed. Jesus is giving us a word picture of him standing up in front of the crowd of all humanity, calling off the names of those who are his.

The bottom line is that they needed to hang on, strengthen what they had in their faith in Christ, and not allow the culture and false teaching to stain them and compromise their faithful witness.

The next church is...

6. Philadelphia

This city was destroyed by earthquakes in AD 17, and the aftershocks continued for years, so most people moved temporarily out of the city. On top of that, a nearby volcano destroyed Laodicea in 60 AD, and the earthquakes from *that* caused even *more* tension.

I remember being in my living room in Salem, Oregon, the morning Mt. St. Helens erupted. I didn't know yet that it erupted, but I felt the earth shake, over 120 miles away. Remember the fear it caused, not only from all the ash that fell, but the fear that it would blow again? *That* was life in Philadelphia all the time. So it made sense that Jesus would say that those who remained faithful witnesses would be like solid pillars in His temple.

After earthquakes destroyed the city in 17 AD, it was rebuilt by Caesar, so its name was changed to "Neocaesarea." In the AD 70's it was renamed "Flavia," but people kept calling it Philadelphia. So again, it makes sense that Jesus refers to the name of God, the name of God's city, and the name of Christ – all permanent names for eternity, compared to the ever-changing name of the city of Philadelphia.

When Jesus addressed the church in this city, he had no rebukes – only good things to say! He acknowledged that they were tired from fighting off the culture of the city around them, and told them that he would open the door for them, since they were too weak to "open" it. So what is "the door?" The door represented a couple of things: it was the doorway to eternity or heaven. Jesus would make sure the door to heaven was open for them. But the door was also a doorway to missions. Jesus was saying that because they were faithful witnesses for him, they had an open doorway to witness to people. Their lives were a witness to those who didn't know Jesus, and Jesus himself would make sure that door stayed open.

Now, I have to point something out here: Jesus says in verse ten that they will be kept from the "hour of trial" that everyone will face and be tested by. There are some people who believe that Jesus is saying that they will be "raptured" before any tribulation happens. But if you believe that, you will fail any beginning Greek language class. Jesus is *not* saying they will be "raptured" out of tribulation. Jesus

says they will be “kept from the hour of trial.” The word “kept” is also “protect.” It means to be protected during a continual state of trial. It is the exact same word Jesus used in John 17:15 when he prayed that we would not be taken out of the world but protected while IN the world. So what Jesus is saying here is they will be protected *through* trials, not prevented from trials!

The last church we have is...

7. Laodicea

Laodicea was a prosperous city with strong monetary banks – it was like the wall street of the ancient world. Something else that’s interesting: they didn’t have their own water supply. Their water had to be piped in from a spring that was 6 miles away, so by the time they got it, the water was lukewarm. Sound familiar?

Jesus has nothing good to say about this church – only rebuke. He says that they are lukewarm, like the water in the city. He wishes they were either hot or cold, but lukewarm makes him want to spit them out. The actual words are “vomit.” I’m a sympathetic vomiter. If someone barfs, the sight and smell of it makes me want to puke too. The thought of Jesus puking is just too much for me. And Jesus meant it that strongly!

Jesus is not using the analogy of water as a sort of spiritual temperature gauge, saying that we should only be spiritually hot. If so, why would he say that he wished they were hot OR cold? Here’s the point: in a nearby city there was a hot springs that was considered medicinal to bathe in. In the other direction was a city that had ice cold pure springs – water that was cool and refreshing. The water of Laodicea was neither medicinal nor refreshing. Jesus was saying that as a church they were ineffective – not good for anything.

Like the city, they thought they were “rich” (like the rich farmer, Luke 12:19) but they were spiritually poor. They thought they had vision, but they were self-deluded and spiritually blind. The city had a famous medical school, and was also well known for having invented an eye salve that was supposed to treat blindness. Jesus is saying that in reality they were spiritually poor and blind. They needed to get their wealth and healing from him, not from their culture. Also, the city of Laodicea was famous for its textiles; Jesus said they were naked. The city was famous for its black cloth; Jesus said they needed to be dressed in white.

Jesus reminded them that he loves them – that’s why he was rebuking them. Like a parent who disciplines a child to correct bad behavior, Jesus loves us too much to let us keep hurting ourselves, so he disciplines us in the hopes that we will straighten up. Then he invites the church to listen, to open the door to him, and to enjoy the closest of friendship with him – sharing a meal. The image is the same as our communion.

If you’ve been around the church, you’ve heard Revelation 3:20 before: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” (niv) You know that we often

quote this to invite people to become Christians. But that is taking it out of context; it was not written to non-Christians; it was written to Christians who needed to get their act together before they fell away from the faith. But despite Jesus' harsh words, he loves them and longs for them to "open the door" and enjoy dinner with him. Even when he disciplines us, he loves us.

So there are the seven churches. You tell me: in all of that, what were some things you heard that could be a word to us at West Valley Church? (*Give them time to share.*)

Let me sum it up, and here's what's interesting: in each case, the church had taken on the attitudes and the culture of the world around them. In the case of the two churches that Jesus did *not* rebuke, he commended them for NOT taking on the characteristics of the church around them. In each case, he sets up himself as the opposite of the ethos or the attitude of the city each church was in.

Here's the word for us from Christ to all seven churches (listen carefully!): we are very worried these days about how America is becoming less and less Christian. But we should be *more* concerned about how *we* are becoming more and more American. Do you understand what I am saying? (*repeat*) In each case, the church became less Christian and more like the culture of their city. In each case, Jesus told them to become less like the culture of their city and become more like Jesus.

When you get concerned about the state of America, maybe you should not pray for them to be like us, maybe you should pray more for us to be like Jesus.

And that is the word for us as individuals, too: Be a faithful witness! Always remember that Jesus loves you! He died and rose from the dead to rescue from the fallen, evil systems of this world, of thinking, and of sin. Be vigilant! Be alert! Repent if you need to! Obey Jesus and be faithful witness for him, even if it costs you something...or even if it costs you everything. Because the church is YOU. The church is US. Let's be his witnesses to a world that needs to see him. And the way the culture sees Jesus is in the way we love him, the way we love and serve each other, and the way we love and serve the culture around us.

Pray