

**Jesus Diagnoses and Prescription  
for a Healthy Church**  
Revelation 2:1-17

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I don't like going for checkups. I don't like going to the doctor for my annual physical. I don't like it when my mechanic looks over my car. I haven't been to the dentist for a long time. I don't even like the computer diagnostics because of all the things it might find.

Maybe you're a little like me. I don't want to know all the possible things that could be wrong. Usually, we don't want a diagnosis unless something is really wrong. We don't feel well so we go to the doctor. Our car does not run well so we go to the mechanic. Our tooth hurts so we go to the dentist. Our computer runs slow. So we submit to the diagnostic.

Though we may not really want to hear the diagnosis, we need to hear it if we're going to get better or fixed. The doctor explains & then prescribes some medicine or treatment. The mechanic explains what needs to be done and how much it will cost. The dentist discovers the source of our pain and proposes a course of action. The computer diagnostic tells us we need a new computer. And we likely fill the prescription or get the work done on the car or sit in the dentist chair or get the new computer.

But sometimes we wait too long. We keep ignoring the pain until we finally go to the doctor and she reveals that we have a deadly disease that has advanced all over the body. The mechanic discovers major problems that will cost 4 times the value of the car to fix for it get back on the road. So you're suddenly faced with a major bill or a car purchase. The dentist discovers green bugs infesting your teeth which require they all get pulled and you suddenly have to get dentures. You get the picture.

So though we might not like it there is value in annual physicals; routine car inspections, dental checkups and regular computer scans. Then we can find out what's really happening and address anything that needs addressing.

The same is true in our Christian walk. We need a regular check up to find out what's going well and where we might need help. How can we know the state of our spiritual health – corporately and individually? We must go to Jesus & His Word because He perfectly diagnoses and prescribes steps to spiritual health for individuals and churches.

We will see Him do this over the next couple of messages as we continue in our study of the book of Revelation. We come now to one of the most easy to apply sections – the messages to the 7 churches. Last week in Revelation 1, we

saw Jesus commission John to write what he sees to 7 churches. We noticed that the number 7 is a favorite of John's. It can symbolize perfection and completeness. So messages to 7 churches could symbolize a message to the whole or complete church.

But these were real churches that existed in John's time at the end of the first century in each city mentioned. Jesus speaks to each church. He diagnosing what they do right and wrong. Then He prescribes what they need to regain or maintain their spiritual health. As we go through each church, I pray that Jesus will speak to us both corporately and individually. If you will open yourself up to Jesus' words, you can receive a spiritual checkup that will hopefully encourage you and spur you on to what Jesus wants for you. Today we look at the first 3 churches, Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.

**Revelation 2:1-17 (ESV)** (Page 867)

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some

of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

Remember John was on the island of Patmos. So a courier would need to take a ship and go to Ephesus. Jesus starts with the church in Ephesus. We know a fair amount about this church from earlier in the New Testament. Acts 18:18-22 tells us that Paul came to Ephesus with a couple; Priscilla and Aquilla. Paul left this couple in Ephesus while he goes off to do some other mission work. So it's possible they evangelized in Ephesus which led to the founding of the church there. Then Paul returns to Ephesus and stays there about 2 years. Acts 19 tells us about a riot there because of the impact of Christianity on the economy of silversmiths who made mini idols. We also have the letter to the Ephesians written by Paul. And we have the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> letters to Timothy who it seems pastored the church at Ephesus. Yet, the apostle John is most closely associated with Ephesus. If you were with us a couple of years ago when we went through John's letters, you might remember that many scholars think John wrote these letters while in Ephesus which was his base of operations.

The city was a great commercial center situated at the mouth of a river. It was also an outstanding religious center which contained the temple to Artemis one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. At its height, Ephesus reached a population of 250,000. It would be a natural first stop for a messenger carrying a letter from John on Patmos.

Jesus starts by speaking to the angel of the church of Ephesus. We saw last week in Revelation 1:20 that the seven stars held in Jesus' right hand were the 7 angels of the churches. These angels could be actual angels designated to the church. They could be human leaders. But they could also refer to the spirit of the church.

Jesus starts by reminding them that He is lord over the churches because he holds the 7 stars in his right hand. But He also cares for the church because he stands among the 7 golden lampstands. Each lampstand represents one of the churches.

So in 2:2, Jesus commends the Ephesian for what they're doing well. **2:2-3 Commends – Toil, Endurance, Discernment.** "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false." So they worked. They toiled in ministry. Toil meant to labor to the point of weariness. They persevered in the faith despite opposition and persecution. And they discerned spiritual error. They wouldn't bear with those who were evil. They even exposed those

who claimed to be apostles but were actually false. In verse 3, Jesus recognizes their patient endurance and their unwillingness to give up the faith.

That sounds like a pretty good church doesn't it? They work hard. Hard work. Perseverance. Ministry. Careful about doctrine. They're not afraid to confront those who promote false teaching. That's a pretty good spiritual diagnosis.

But then comes verse 4. "But I have this against you. **Jesus confronts their abandonment of their first love.** You have abandoned the love you had at first or forsaken your first love. The Ephesians used to love. But now they had abandoned such love. Whose love did they abandon? There are two possibilities. It could be their love for Jesus. Or it could be their love for one another. The two are really interconnected. If we love Jesus, it will result in love for one another. If we aren't loving one another it questions our love for Jesus. But they had abandoned this love. It seems like desire for sound teaching and the action taken to ensure it may have created a climate of suspicion in which brotherly love could no longer exist. Good works are great. Sound doctrine is great. But if these come at the cost of love, that's wrong.

We might say, "Well, 2 out of 3 "isn't" bad. If you've got good works and good doctrine, you're two thirds there." Is that what Jesus thought? Verse 5. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen." **Prescription – Remember the height of love you formerly had for Christ and one another.** Jesus paints an image like the Ephesian Christians had fallen off the top of the mountain. Now they look up and remember what it was like to be up there. If they are going to get back up there they have to remember the love they had for Christ and one another. Then they would need to begin the long journey to get back to the height.

The second piece of the prescription is **Repentance**. Repent means to turn away from one direction and towards another. Repent from forsaking love. Repent from being so consumed with ministry that we forget to love people. Repent from being so concerned with sound doctrine that we just walk around judging people and checking to see if they've got the right doctrine. "Well that's a little much isn't it? Surely, it's not that big of a deal."

What does Jesus say will happen if they don't remember and repent? Second half of verse 5 – "If not, if you don't remember the height of love from which you've fallen; if you don't repent from this and do the works done at first with love, I will come to you and what? Encourage you to love each other? No. I will remove your lampstand from its place

unless you repent. The lampstand was the church itself. If the Ephesians did not repent and start loving, Jesus would take the church away. It would cease to exist.

So a church without love for Christ and one another is a deficient church in Christ's eyes. Yet Jesus offers a final word of encouragement – verse 6 – Yet this you have – you hate the works of the Nicolaitans which I also hate. We'll talk briefly about the Nicolaitans later. Then verse 7. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. So he invites everyone to hear this message. Everyone who hears or reads it must hear and understand what Jesus says to the individual churches. Then we can learn from it and take any prescriptions we need. Finally Jesus promises those who conquer to eat of the tree of life. That's the tree Adam and Eve got banned from in the Garden of Eden. But now, those who overcome will get to enjoy that tree in paradise, God's garden.

Next comes Smyrna. We don't know a lot about the church there. But this city was also on the coast and had an excellent harbor at the head of a well-protected gulf. It was a natural outlet for the trade of the valley. The city was destroyed in 580 BC and rebuilt about 290 according to very careful plans. So unlike most ancient cities that just arose with streets here and there, Smyrna was organized. Many ancient writers comment on its beauty. It was a faithful ally to Rome and it had a large Jewish population. There was a shrine to Homer who may have been born there. The modern city of Izmir, Turkey now surrounds Smyrna.

Jesus addresses the church with some of his own words that were spoken to John in the previous chapter. Verse 8 – To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life." Jesus comforted John in Revelation 1:17-18 with these words "Fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one. I died and behold I am alive ever more." So he reminds the Christians here that He is lord over death and has come through it to live again. They will need this kind of encouragement.

In 2:9 He **Commends/Knows their tribulation, poverty and slander endured**. They have suffered tribulation for their faith. They have faced a burden that crushes with serious troubles. They have endured extreme poverty. Yet though they were materially poor, they were spiritually rich. They have also endured slander from those who say they are Jews but are not really. Jesus calls the Jews who slandered part of the synagogue of Satan.

Now that's a phrase we have to be very careful with. Some extreme Christians have used it to justify their anti-Jewish attitudes or racism. Jesus reveals that some Jews in Smyrna were more committed to working with the Romans

than in being Jews whose primary focus was faithfulness to God. Jewish opposition to Christians is alleged in the martyr or killing of the Christian bishop Polycarp. According to the story, some Jews betrayed him to the Romans and then participated in building up the place of execution.

So these Christians at Smyrna suffered a lot. Notice **Jesus confronts nothing**. They experience such a severe persecution that all they can do is try to survive. So He **Prescribes - Do not fear. Be faithful unto death** in verse 10. So they will certainly suffer. Some will be thrown into prison for 10 days of testing. The 10 days remind us of the 10 days of testing Daniel and his three friends went through in Daniel 1. They were taken to captivity in Babylon. The Babylonians wanted to make them “Babylonianize” them including changing their diet. But Daniel asked if they could eat the regular Hebrew diet for 10 days. If they came out okay, he asked if they could continue the diet. After 10 days, they were stronger than the others.

Here, the 10 days in prison was also for testing. It may have indicated that they would be in prison for a short time. They would only wait the 10 days before they were released or executed. Jesus’ last phrase in verse 10 leans towards execution – “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.”

Then Jesus concludes with the formula “He who has ears to hear let him hear. And to him or her who overcomes, they will not be hurt by the second death. They may physically die. But they will not experience the second death which is the eternal separation from God.

Now we might say “this doesn’t have much to do with us.” But the question really begs to be asked. Are we prepared to die for Christ’s name if necessary? We can’t really answer that until we face it. For a lot of Christians in the world, this is not just a thought exercise. It is a real question sometimes daily. What about us? One commentator points out “we prepare best for future tests by passing the ones we are given in the present.” Might our tests today prepare us to die for Christ tomorrow? I pray that we won’t face such a test but we never know.

Then we come to the church at Pergamum. Jesus introduces himself as the one who has the sharp two edged sword. Last week we saw John describe this. Likely it refers to the sharpness, truth and ability of Jesus’ words to expose or lay open our lives. Pergamum was an inland city not known for its trading. But it apparently had a library with 200,000 parchment scrolls. Some even argue that the word parchment is related to Pergamum because of all the scrolls held

there. It was an important religious center. There was a temple to Zeus built on the high hill above the city. There was also a temple to the god of healing, Asclepius the serpent. People would come from all over the world to be healed here.

So when Jesus says in verse 13, I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is,” He’s likely referring to one these temples at the top of the hill that looked out over the city like a throne. But then Jesus **Commends – Holding fast to Christ’s name and keeping the faith.** Though there were all these other religious influences in the city, they had some success in remaining true to Christ. They didn’t intentionally participate in regular worship of zeus or Asclepius. Nor did they deny the faith when one of their own, a man name Antipas was killed for his faith. He is described as a faithful witness like Jesus back in Revelation 1:5. Remember, faithful witnesses in Revelation all suffer the penalty of death.

But Jesus had a few things against them. He **Confronts their stumbling into false worship by their behavior.** That’s not what it says but that’s how I would interpret the teaching of Balaam. Though they hold fast to Christ’s name there are some who hold to the teaching of Balaam. There was no temple to Balaam in Pergamum. Balaam comes from the Old Testament Numbers 22-25. He was a prophet hired by a foreign king to curse Israel. But instead he blessed Israel under God’s inspiration. Yet Balaam showed the king how he could trip up Israel. Tempt them with a festival where food was served that was offered to idols and you worshipped by hooking up with the temple priestesses. They fell into it by accepting an invitation to the feast. Numbers 25:2 tells us “the daughters of Moab invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. “

Something similar must have happened here. It seems that some in the church thought it no big deal to participate in the festivals to the gods. Each festival would see a huge amount of food offered to the god. A small amount would be burned and the rest would be served or sold to the people. And you would participate visiting the temple priestesses. So though they may not directly have worshipped the gods, they fell into this worship by participating in the festival.

So what Satan could not accomplish through intimidation, suffering and even putting Antipas to death, he could accomplish through deception. “Come to the festival. It’ll be no harm.” Suddenly their behavior denied Christ and worshipped another god. For us today, something similar might be just going along with the idea that if feels good, do it. Why not? Yet in doing it we might be denying our Lord.

**Prescription – Repent – Change mind and behavior.** Verse 16. Therefore, repent. If not, Jesus says, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He would expose the false teaching and methods of those

who followed Balaam's methods. He also mentions there are some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We just don't have any solid references to this teaching outside of Revelation. But it seems it was similar to this practice of participating in festivals to other gods that led to immorality. But to those who overcome, he or she will be given hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it.

I wish Jesus had interpreted this one for us. There are multiple suggestions for what the hidden manna means and at least 7 for the white stone. Manna, was the food that God rained from heaven in Exodus. He supernaturally provided for the Israelites while they were in the wilderness. A bowl of manna was put in the Ark of the Covenant that was kept in the temple in Jerusalem. But when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 and destroyed the temple, the ark was lost. One tradition holds that the prophet Jeremiah hid the pot of manna when the temple was destroyed and it would reappear when Messiah came. But more likely, it refers to God's provision for them from heaven. And the new name might be Christ or that we are now sons or daughters of God. But whatever it means, it was a promise of future reward for those who remained true to Christ.

Now remember where we started – diagnosis, checkups. It's good to get spiritual checkups especially with Jesus as the doctor. So now we have seen Jesus diagnose and prescribe for 3 churches. Which prescription might we most need to apply to us as a church? Which one might we need to apply in our lives?

Is it to remember how we once loved Christ and others? Then repent and do what we did before? Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Be faithful unto death and Jesus will give the crown of life? Repent from casually living according to the world's ways and ending up living for someone other than Jesus?

We could have a deadly spiritual disease that has eternal consequences. But God cares about us. He cared enough to come to us and wake us up to what's going on in our lives that we may not see. That's what Jesus does here for these people. God has been reaching out to people throughout history to save them from fatal spiritual lostness. We couldn't reach God on our own. We needed our sin problem dealt with. So Christ came to pay for our sin. He offered Himself up as a sacrifice on our behalf for the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with God. Because of this, those who trust in Christ can receive their spiritual diagnosis from Jesus and then apply the prescription by His power and help.

Will you take whatever prescription Jesus has for you today and apply it by His strength and power to your life?

## Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you for speaking to John that day your words of encouragement and correction to these ancient Christians. We will meet them someday in heaven. We can talk with them about what it was like to persevere in the faith in their context.

But we need your power and strength to persevere in the faith in our context.

- Some here today have fallen from the height of love they used to have for you and others. If that describes some of you here, I invite you to pray these words silently after me:
- “Lord Jesus, I recognize the height from which I have fallen with respect to love. I don’t love you or others like I once did. I repent of that. Please empower me to begin the journey back to those heights of love.”
- Some here are enduring great tribulation, poverty or slander. If that describes you, I invite you to pray after me.
- “Lord Jesus, you command me to not be afraid and be faithful unto death. But I am afraid apart from you. Please fill me with a sense of your presence and give me courage to go through what I face.”
- Some may have compromised in some way with the world. If that describes you then will you please pray:
- “Lord Jesus, I recognize now that I have been living in a way displeasing to you. I confess that. Now I ask that by your Spirit, you will empower me to change my heart love and behavior so that it honors you.”
- Some of you may not know Christ at all. You may have never put your trust on Him or received forgiveness by His work on the cross. If you want to receive Jesus now, then please pray this after me:
- Lord Jesus, I confess that I need you. I cannot get to God on my own. I am a sinner. So I put the trust of my life completely on you. I ask you to come into my life as Savior and Lord. Help me now to walk and live in a way that gives you glory.