

REV 2:1-3:22—JESUS' PROMISES TO OVERCOMERS

INTRO: In all areas of life we need to know how we're doing so we can avoid negative consequences and also gain positive benefits. If I'm a student having problems I need to get help or make changes in time to get good grades. If there are problems in my marriage, we can get counseling or make whatever changes we need to do so I don't get served with divorce papers but, instead, we can have a happy and fulfilling marriage. On the job or as a business, we need to know how we're doing before we get fired or go out of business so that we can get raises and promotions or grow the business.

The key to all of these things, as I think we all know, is to know the priorities and expectations of the person we are in relationship with or the one who is doing the evaluating. The student needs to know what the teacher expects; a spouse needs to know the likes and dislikes of the other spouse; an employee needs to know the expectations of the boss; and a business owner needs to know the market.

The same things are true for us as Christians and for the church as a whole. **The word "Christian" is based on what word? (Christ). And we say we are a church that worships who as our Lord? (Christ) Since that is true, whose opinion, and priorities, and expectations do you think we need to know in order to be the kind of Christians and kind of church that we should be? (Christ's)—Very good!**

In Rev 2-3 Jesus has promised rewards to those who know his mind and who act accordingly. We should know what these promises are so that we can know what is in store for us. But more than that, what Christ promises to us reveals what is important *to Him*. Because I'm dealing with two complete chapters, I'm just going to read the *promises* that Jesus makes to the churches rather than the entire chapters. During the course of this sermon we will be discussing the other aspects of both chapters because that provides the background for the promises Jesus makes. [READ Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26-29; 3:5-6; 12-13; 21-22]

PROP: Jesus' promises reveal his priorities.

O/S: We will understand Jesus' priorities as we take a look at three things: (1) How Jesus evaluates the churches; (2) What an "overcomer" is; and (3) The nature of the promises that Jesus makes to overcomers.

I. How Jesus evaluates the churches.

In the portions of **Rev 2-3** that I read, each message to an individual church ends with the words, "**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**" So basically, anything that is said in these two chapters that applies to one applies to all, both individually and corporately.

Although I did not read every verse of **Rev 2-3**, in his evaluation of the churches Jesus told every single church "*I know* what you're going through," or "**I know your deeds.**"

A. What are the good things that Jesus specifically commends? Because of time I will focus only on the good things that Jesus repeats to more than one of the churches—since repeating something indicates its importance. There are three things that Jesus repeatedly commends:

The first thing is perseverance. Jesus commends Ephesus for its perseverance in **2:2** and in **v.3** which says, "**You have perseverance and have endured for my name's sake and have not grown weary.**" He commends Thyatira's perseverance in **2:19** and Philadelphia's in **3:10**. Perseverance is staying faithful; not falling back into sin or apostasy. Perseverance is continuing to do what we ought to be doing day in and day out, in good times and bad, whether we want to or not, whether we're recognized for it or not—because Jesus recognizes it.

The second thing Jesus commends, which is closely related to perseverance, is **not denying the faith—****not denying the name of Jesus.** Jesus commends Pergamum for this in **2:13** ("**You hold fast my name and did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas**") and he tells Philadelphia in **3:8** "**You have kept my word and have not denied my name.**" In both cases the specific context had to do with pressure put on people, or even persecution, because they were Christians. Today, of course, we know that is happening wherever Islam is in control. Here, we do not face that same kind of pressure, but there are always the subtle pressures like "what will people think if I name the name of Jesus?"—so we keep silent. Or "our boss expects us to do something we know is wrong"—but we "go along to get along" and so we do it anyway. Jesus sees that; he knows.

The third thing that Jesus repeats in a positive way has to do with **white garments.** In **3:4** Jesus says that the few faithful believers in Sardis "**have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white for they are worthy.**" In **3:18** he exhorts Laodicea to obtain "**white garments so that you may clothe yourself and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed.**" Later in the book, **Rev 19:8** tells us what those

white garments are. In talking about the church, the bride of the Lamb, it says [READ Rev 19:8]. What we do now has eternal consequences. Every positive, righteous act we do because we love Jesus is like adding another stitch in the eternal garments with which we are clothing ourselves.

So those are the things in the church Jesus finds particularly important: perseverance; not denying his name or the faith when faced with pressure to do so, and doing the things we should—loving our neighbor as ourselves. Therefore we need to ask ourselves: How are we doing with perseverance, faithfulness, and doing as we should—loving our neighbors?

B. What are the things that Jesus does *not* like, the things he condemns? As with the positive things, again I will only focus on the things that Jesus repeats more than once. And again, there are three main areas that Jesus repeatedly condemns.

The first thing that Jesus condemns is a twofold matter of **idolatry and immorality.** To Pergamum in 2:14 he talks about some who lead others “**to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality,**” and to Thyatira in 2:20 he talks about how the false prophetess Jezebel led some “**to commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.**” In the 1st century, a huge issue was eating food sacrificed to idols. But doing that was just the external manifestation of idolatry that had already taken place in the heart. Once idolatry occurs, it leads to every other kind of sin and immorality. Why is that?

The reason is that idolatry is root sin of mankind—because idolatry is putting anything or anyone over God and Christ. That’s why in the 10 Commandments the first 2 commandments deal with the issue of idolatry—“**I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before Me; and you shall not make for yourself any idol; you shall not worship them or serve them.**” But idolatry is not just worshiping physical things. Idolatry begins in the heart. For example, the 10 Commandments say “**you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not covet.**”

But to break any of those commands is also to be an idolater. Why? Because at the point when you do any of those things *you are putting something or someone else over God in Christ.* The sin of adultery begins in the heart as you want that person more than you want Christ; the sin of stealing begins in the heart as you want that thing more than you want Christ; and the sin of coveting is, by its very nature, a matter of the heart. In each case you are putting something or someone over Christ—that something or someone is your true, functional Lord—your idol. Therefore, idolatry is both the root sin of mankind, and it leads to every other sin.

The second thing that Jesus repeatedly condemns also goes to the heart of matters. To both Smyrna in 2:9 and Philadelphia in 3:9 Jesus condemns “**those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**” What is going on here? Throughout the book of Revelation and the whole NT, all of the names and things of Israel are reapplied to the church. For example, the church is called the temple of God; the church is called the seed of Abraham, a royal priesthood, the true circumcision; and Jesus is called our great high priest. IOW, *the church is the new, true, spiritual Israel.* True, spiritual Israel consists of people from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people who put *Christ* first in their lives, over everyone and everything else.

Because the first believers were all Jews, when Revelation was written, there were lots of ethnic Jews in the churches. But many were not what Jesus calls “true Jews”—they were not true, *spiritual* Israel. They were people who named Jesus’ name but had never really broken with their past. Having Jesus as our Lord means that there is now a fundamentally new allegiance in our lives: it is not our race, our socio-economic status, our political party, or our nation—it is Jesus. How are we doing with that?

This leads to the final thing that Jesus repeatedly condemns, namely, **the failure of the churches and the people to evaluate themselves.** Jesus does this by way of *contrast.* To Sardis in 3:1 he says, “**I know your deeds that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.**” And to Laodicea he says in 3:17 he says, “**You say I am rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing, but you don’t know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.**”

All of us easily can have a false conception of ourselves. The problem is that we are blind to our own blindnesses. We think that the way *we* see things is the way *everyone else* sees things or *should* see things. That’s why we need other people, and we need to listen to them—because as people speak the truth in love, they help us stay on the right path.

Notice something: Jesus’ evaluation of the churches ultimately relates to our relationship with *Him.* If he truly is #1 in our life, if he truly is our Lord, we *will* persevere; we will *not* deny the faith; we will act as he acts. But if he is not truly our Lord, we will be idolaters with a Christian face; we will think we are something when we are nothing. Jesus knows where hearts really are. Do we?

This is something we need to honestly reflect on and change whatever needs changing. Jesus told every church with which he found fault to “repent.” But then he went on to promise rewards to those who repent. And every one of his seven messages ends with a statement like “**To him who overcomes [I will give this or that].**”

II. What is an “overcomer”

The Greek word translated “overcome” (or “conquer” as the ESV puts it) is also found in **Rev 12:11; 15:2** and **21:7-8**. In all of these places the context shows us that our “overcoming” is based on Christ’s own overcoming of Satan and death. IOW, we are to follow in our Master’s footsteps. We “overcome,” both individually and corporately, by maintaining a faithful witness in the face of trials, in overcoming the powers of evil, in subduing sin in our lives, in identifying with Jesus in all circumstances even to death. *This is what the Christian life is all about.*

And take note: there are not two “classes” of Christians—overcomers and non-overcomers. Jesus only made promises to overcomers, and in 2:26 he specifically linked being an overcomer with “he who keeps my deeds until the end.”

If Jesus is our true, functional Lord, then our lives will show it. Not perfectly; none of us is perfect. But the ultimate issue is: **“Is Jesus really our Lord, or do we have something or someone else that is our true, functional Lord?”** The issue is the difference between being a Christian—or being an idolater who happens to cover up his or her idolatry with spiritual “God talk.”

But for those of us who are Christians—and I hope to God that includes all of us—then what is:

III. The nature of the promises Jesus makes to overcomers

As with Jesus’ evaluation of the churches, Jesus’ promises reveal his priorities. Because Jesus makes more than one promise to several of the churches, I think we can combine the promises into four basic categories: promises concerning Life, a Name, Authority, and Relationship with him.

A. The promises concerning Life.

By this I mean what Jesus promises to Ephesus in **2:7**—**“To him who overcomes I will grant to eat of the tree of life,”** to Smyrna in **2:11**—**“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death,”** and to Sardis in **3:5**—**I will not erase his name from the book of life.”**

These are all different ways of saying, “Everyone who is in Christ has eternal life.” The book of Revelation specifies again and again that every human being on earth has one of two ultimate ends: either eternal life in a new, glorious, resurrected body on the new earth, or being cast into what **Rev 20** calls the “lake of fire,” which is the “second death.”

But it is important for us to understand that eternal life begins now. The apostle John says in **John 3:36**, **“He who believes in the Son has eternal life.”** That is *present tense*. John is saying what Jesus is saying. If we are part of true *spiritual Israel*, then we have eternal life *now*—and it will continue forever—because Jesus said **“I will never leave you or forsake you”** and **“I will not erase your name from the book of life.”**

Eternal life is not just living forever; it is a different quality of life. It is being united to Jesus; it is becoming like Jesus; it is having *his* values, *his* priorities, thinking like *he* thought, and acting like *he* acted. That’s why we need to evaluate ourselves—and our evaluation needs to correspond to what Jesus reveals in *his* evaluation of the churches.

The fundamental question we must ask is **Who is my true, functional Lord?** In those areas in which we need to repent and change, do it. The stakes are so great: eternal life in all its glory and wonder and fullness, or the second death in all of its horror. According to Jesus, it is one or the other. There is no third alternative.

B. The promises concerning a Name.

By this I mean what Jesus promises to Pergamum in **2:17**—**“I will give him a white stone and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it,”** to Sardis in **3:5**—**“I will confess his name before my Father and before His angels,”** and to Philadelphia in **3:12**—**“I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven from My God and My new name.”**

The name “which no one knows but he who receives it,” what is it? I don’t know. But I do know this. It tells us that Jesus knows us inside-out, better than we know ourselves. He knows what’s in us, what we’re really like, and what our full potential is. It’s sort of like Gideon in the book of Judges. Gideon said **“My family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house,”** and he was threshing wheat hiding in a wine press because he was afraid of the Midianites. But when the angel of the Lord appeared to him, the angel addressed him like this, **“The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior.”** God knew what was in Gideon that Gideon himself didn’t even suspect. And Jesus knows the same about each one of us—which is why he said to the church at Smyrna in **2:9**, **“I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich.”**

Jesus’ statement about confessing our name before the Father is like eternal life; confessing the name begins now. In **Matt 10** Jesus said, **“Everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before**

My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.” Are we confessing Jesus before people now, or not? Lots of people say they believe in God—but the issue is *Jesus*. He is the one we need to confess now. Doing so is an indication of whether we really are Christ’s or are not.

C. The promises concerning Authority.

By this I mean what Jesus promises to Thyatira in **2:26-27**—“**I will give authority over the nations . . . as I also have received authority from My Father,**” and to Laodicea in **3:21**—“**He who overcomes I will grant to sit down with Me on My throne as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.**”

This is one reason why we need to evaluate our lives. But the evaluation of our *spiritual* condition should not be based on our outward *economic* condition. We may be powerful, rich, or successful and “**have need of nothing,**” but spiritually, in Christ’s eyes, we may be “**wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.**” Instead, we need to look at whether or not the things that are important to Jesus are also important to us. If we are truly aligned with him, then we may be poor and weak now, but we will be on the very throne of heaven itself later and for all eternity. Which is more important to us?

One thing that is becoming clear to me is that what Jesus values—and values for us—is not the same thing that we tend to look forward to when we think about eternal rewards on our own. When we think about rewards of living on the new earth we tend to think along the lines of living in a mansion, and doing all kinds of wonderful things. For example, Randy Alcorn, in his book *Heaven*, says, “**Imagine the animals that zoologists will research and play with or the flowers that botanists will study. Gifted astronomers and explorers may go from star system to star system, galaxy to galaxy, studying the wonder of God’s creation.**”

That’s just an updated version of the Qur’an’s way of talking about paradise. The Qur’an says, “**They will sit on couches upholstered with brocade, the fruit of both gardens within easy reach**” [Q. 55:54].

For all the profound differences between Christianity and Islam, most of us tend to think about eternal rewards much like Muslims do. We all tend to look at our lives now and magnify and project the things we like into our eternal future—whether it’s traveling to star systems or sitting on couches upholstered with brocade. For all of us, it’s about what makes *me* happy. But that’s not what Jesus is doing here—or maybe he *is*—but what *he* is promising us should cause us to re-evaluate *ourselves*. IOW, since Jesus’ promises reveal *his* priorities, they also reveal or expose *our own* priorities. How do ours align with his? The things he is focusing on primarily have to do with our oneness with *him*: the same Life that he has, the Name that he has, the Authority that he has. Which leads to the fourth set of promises:

D. The promises concerning Relationship with Jesus.

By this I mean what Jesus promises to Pergamum in **2:17**—“**I will give some of the hidden manna and I will give him a white stone,**” to Thyatira in **2:28**—“**I will give him the morning star,**” and to Philadelphia in **3:12**—“**I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God.**”

These promises highlight our oneness and intimacy with Christ. Jesus *is* the manna. In **John 6** Jesus said, “**Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. . . . I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.**”

Jesus *is* the white stone. Jesus said in **Mark 12:10**, “**Have you not read this Scripture: ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone.’**”

Jesus *is* the morning star. In **Rev 22:16** Jesus concludes the book of Revelation by saying “**I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.**”

The idea of oneness with Jesus is reinforced in his promise to Philadelphia about being a “pillar in the temple of My God.” Why? Because a pillar is an integral component of a building—the building is not complete without it. It is not an optional extra. **Rev 21:22** describes the New Jerusalem by saying, “**I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.**” When Jesus says we will be a pillar in the temple, he is talking about the intimacy of our relationship *with him* forever—because he *is* the temple. We are not optional extras to Jesus.

In these promises Jesus is saying, “Everything that I am, I give to you.” He is promising us an amazing intimacy of relationship with himself. That is why in the NT, and in Revelation in particular, Jesus is called the bridegroom and husband and the church is called the bride and wife. Jesus is promising us *himself*. He is giving us himself completely, intimately, and forever, in a way that the best marriages on earth only hint at. That is what Jesus lives for and what he died for. He became sin *for us*, he bore our hells *to get us*. It was all worth it to him because he would then have us as his everlasting bride.

CONCL: What do we think about all this? Is Jesus an “optional extra” in our lives? These two chapters reveal what is most important to Jesus, both negatively and positively. They reveal his values and priorities and thereby expose our own values and priorities. I don’t know about you, but I need to meditate on these things and, God willing, get over the idea that “Yeah, that sounds nice, but I hope I can live in a mansion and won’t be bored.”

All the rewards Jesus promises ultimately reveal our intimate, eternal, oneness with him. He has eternal life—he gives us his life. He is “the name above all names”—he gives us his name. He reigns over the universe—we sit on his throne. He is the manna; he is the white stone; he is the morning star; he is the temple—and he gives it all to us, because he gives *himself* to us, wholly and unreservedly.

Since these are the most important things to the most important being in the universe, and this is what we have to look forward to, what can we do but give ourselves to him, wholly and unreservedly. That is what he is calling us to do in **Rev 2-3**. By God’s grace, let us strive to do that.