



Jesus' messages to the churches, part 1

Revelation 2 – Leaders version

Check in – with the group sitting in a semi-circle go round and ask everyone, including leaders, how they are and how they're feeling about studying the Bible today.

1. What do you remember from the last study we did?

Points to pick up – John sees Jesus in his glory, Jesus says that he will give John a revelation (unveiling/ revealing) of what is happening now and what will happen in the future.

What does the passage say and mean?

90 minutes

Ephesus – lost their first love

2. Think back to last week – who is speaking? How is He described? (Revisit Rev 1 v 20 for comparison)

Jesus is speaking (1 v 18). He is holding the seven stars in his right hand and walking among the seven lampstands – think about what this means. Stars = angels (or leaders) of 7 churches (1 v 20). Lampstands = the churches (1 v 20).

3. Read Revelation 2 v 1-7. For what does Jesus speak well of the people in the Ephesian church? (v2-3)

They have worked hard for him, they have stuck at it despite suffering and they do not tolerate wicked people (who claim to teach about Jesus but are liars) but have tested them (by comparing what they say with Scripture).

4. What does Jesus identify as their big problem and what do you think he means? (v4)

They have forsaken (abandoned) their first love. Let the group discuss what this might mean, and then explain that opinions vary – love for Christ (Bewes 2003, p29), love for each other (Johnson 2001, p72, Kelly 2002, p49) or love for Christ / each other / the world (Explore Notes 12/9/13). All of the above are valid and back-sliding in our love for any of them needs addressing.

Love for Christ – if a church's love for Christ (and, by definition, the individual's love for Christ) has cooled

off, they may carry on doing the same things and living a Christian life, but it has just become what they do; it's no longer done out of love for Christ and doesn't bring glory to God. Something else has become their first love, rather than Christ, and they are being challenged to address this.

Love for others / the world – if a church's love for others has cooled off, they may still be genuinely praising and worshipping God, but they have become inward focussed, no longer sharing the gospel outside the church or looking after those in need, no longer showing the love of Christ to others.

5. What does Jesus tell them to do, and what will be the consequences otherwise? (v5)

To think about how far they have fallen (from the love they had at first) and to repent (to turn back to God and away from their sin – whether it is the sin of abandoning their love for God, each other or the world).

Otherwise, their lampstand will be removed from its place i.e. their local church will die away.

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If you are a Christian, would you say that you LOVE Jesus?

Would you say that you love him as much today as you did on the day you first trusted him? What needs to change?

It's easy to be grateful to Jesus for what he's done for you without loving him – this question aims to help people to think about whether they actually love him.

NB we will deal with the verses about 'him who overcomes' for all seven churches together at the end of the next study.

Questions 6-8 are **SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS**. You need to write them on flip-chart sheets for the group to work on in pairs.

Smyrna – no criticism!

6. **SDL** Read Revelation 2 v 8-11. How is Jesus described in v8? (revisit Revelation 1 v 17-18 for comparison)

As the first and last, the one who died and came to life again.

7. **SDL** For what does Jesus speak well of the people in the Smyrnan church and what does he say is going to happen? (v8-10)

They are poor, suffering and being slandered. Some of them will be put in prison and be persecuted for ten days.

8. **SDL** Jesus says that they are poor, and yet rich. What do you think he means?

They are materially poor but spiritually rich. He's talking about the treasures in heaven that he talked about in Matthew 6 v 19-21.

9. **SHOUT-OUT** Why do you think Christians are persecuted for their faith?

Write their answers on the flip-chart. If no-one has said it, add that the gospel is inherently offensive to people who don't believe they are sinners.

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As Christians, how do you think we should respond to being persecuted or criticised for our faith?

Be faithful to Christ, whatever comes (v10).

Think about what this means – verbally defending the gospel, clinging to Christ, drawing our identity and strength and reason for being from Him and not from the world, living in a way that is consistent with following Christ despite the cost, etc.

Pergamum – pick-and-mix religion

10. Read Revelation 2 v 12-17. How is Jesus described in v12? (revisit Revelation 1 v 16 for comparison)

As having a sharp double-edged sword (in 1 v 16 it comes from His mouth and symbolises the word of God).

11. For what does Jesus speak well of the people in the Pergamum church? (v13)

They remain true to Jesus, despite living in a place where Satan's opposition is great. They have continued to follow Jesus, despite one of their members being killed for his faith.

12. What does Jesus identify as their big problem and what do you think he means? (v14-15)

Some (not all) of them are accepting a teaching that it was OK to eat food offered to idols and to commit sexual immorality. Some of them also accepted the teaching of the Nicolaitans (the Ephesians were commended for rejecting this teaching, Rev 2 v 6). The teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans allude to one issue, 'luring Christians into sexual and spiritual infidelity' (Johnson 2001, p77) and Bewes 2003, p31. They are trying to mix another religion with Christianity to create a religion that suits them. Doing this is sinful and denies the truth of the gospel.

Re food offered to idols, see 1 Corinthians 8-11: it is OK to eat food offered to idols as long as you are not involved in worshipping the idol. It's not about the meat, it's about what we think about the meat. (So much

meat was offered to idols in Corinth that it was hard to buy it from any source other than pagan temples). What mattered was the context: if you or a guest are tripped up by eating meat offered to idols, it is not appropriate to eat it as it is damaging your relationship with Jesus. In Pergamum, presumably they were not just eating meat that happened to have been involved in an idolatrous temple sacrifice, they were involved in the sacrifice and the idolatry.

13. What does Jesus tell them to do, and what will be the consequences otherwise? (v16)

To repent. Otherwise, Jesus will fight against them with the sword of His mouth, i.e. the word of God. The whole church is called to repent because some have been directly involved but others have not acted sooner to root out this heresy. They all need to turn back to God and to the truth of Scripture.

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Have you accepted teaching that is not biblical alongside your understanding of the gospel? What needs to happen?

NB the passage is talking about direct non-biblical teaching from those who claim to teach God's word. The letter to Thyatira addresses cultural influences so try not to get distracted by culture yet...

Thyatira – bowing to culture

14. Read Revelation 2 v 18-29. How is Jesus described? (revisit Revelation 1 v 14-15 for comparison). What does this image mean?

As the Son of God. As having eyes like blazing fire (all-seeing (Bewes 2003, p32)) and feet like burnished bronze (similar to 1 v 15, in order to trample the wicked (Hendrickson 1966, p72)). This echoes the description of the Messiah figure in Daniel 7.

15. For what does Jesus speak well of the people in the Thyatiran church? (v19)

Jesus knows their deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance – that they are doing more now than they did at first. It sounds like they are a very active church.

16. What does Jesus identify as their big problem and what do you think he means? (v20-22)

They are tolerating a woman called Jezebel, who claims to be a prophet and teaches that sexual immorality and eating food offered to idols is acceptable. Their toleration shows that they had not exerted church discipline against her. It is likely that Jezebel was a real woman with a code name (Jezebel being a particularly evil queen in 1 Kings 21) (Johnson 2001, p80). Practically speaking, it doesn't really matter who she was – the point is, 1. The original readers knew exactly who Jesus was talking about, 2. The application for today is unchanged by the identity of Jezebel.

Explain that, although the surface issues are the same as for Pergamum, the root issue for Thyatira is pressure to conform to local culture (rather than mixing Christianity with another religion in Thyatira).

17. What does Jesus tell them to do, and what will be the consequences otherwise? (end of v22 -25)

Repent (v22), otherwise, Jesus will strike her children dead (probably referring to her disciples, not to little children (Coffey 2002, p26)). The local church has not disciplined her but Jesus will. This judgement on Jezebel's followers will show all the churches that Jesus knows what we are doing and that there will be judgement and consequences for our actions (v23).

To those who have not followed Jezebel, Jesus simply says, 'hold on to what you have until I come' – keep on keeping on! Don't go the way of those who have followed Jezebel!

Jesus has commended this church in v19, but the good things the church is doing cannot outweigh the bad – we cannot fall back on our good in defence of our bad. It's like saying your arm is only broken in one place...

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Are there ways in which your obedience to Christ is compromised because of your tolerance of the culture you live in? What do you need to do about this?

There is a level on which we are all accepting non-biblical teaching, simply by living day to day in the society we are in and not thinking about how some of society's norms are unbiblical. This can be hard to identify, because it can be our blind-spot...

Check out – with the group sitting in a semi-circle go round and ask everyone, including leaders, how they found the study and if they are safe to go back to the cell.



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