

Postcards – The Faithful Church

3/22/20

Revelation 3:7-13

Sunday AM

Good AM church family and online guest. I pray you have had a peaceful, restful week and that you have experienced the presence of God in your midst.

To say this has been a wild few weeks would be a gross understatement; and only God knows what the future holds. I'm just thankful I know Who holds the future.

As I've been reflecting on what's been happening in our world, I can't help but to think of **open doors** of opportunity. Yes, I know that what's occurring around the world is frightening/challenging, and certainly, disrupting; but I also know for some people, this time is a gift. It's a forced time out. A time to relax. A time to catch up. A time to be w/ our loved ones. A time to recalibrate. A time to take a deep breath and think about what really matters. It's an opportunity.

I shared w/ our church staff that this is a gift of ministry. It's a chance for us to focus on people instead of programs. It's a chance for us to slow down and engage. It's a time to re-prioritize our calling.

Think of it this way. If your company came to you and said, "We think it's in the best interest of our company and your family to take a 15-day vacation!" We'd all be celebrating. And while I know this isn't exactly true for everyone – it can be a time for refreshment.

This AM, I want to return to our previous series on the (7) churches in Revelation. If you recall, back in January, we soft-launched a renewed vision/strategy of ministry for our church as we look to the future – a call to rethink/reinvest ourselves in the G.C.

Based on Paul's version of the G.C. as shared in Colossians 1:28 – *He's the one we proclaim, admonishing/teaching everyone w/ all wisdom, that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.*

I believe this verse gives us our what, why, and how:

Reason – b/c God wants all people to experience a satisfying, significant, intimate relationship w/ Him.

Mission – we must exist to influence all people into intimate fellowship w/ Jesus.

Strategy – by relationally *making, maturing, mobilizing, and multiplying* disciples who make disciples

Which brings me to the intent of our current study of the churches in Revelation. It's to learn ***what to do*** and ***what not to do*** to be a thriving, impacting church.

Today, we're looking at the church at ***Philadelphia*** – the faithful church. It's interesting to me in light of what's happening that this is the next church in our study, b/c more than ever, the church needs to be relationally engaged in sharing God's love in tangible ways.

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy/true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I've placed before you an open door no one can shut. I know you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they're not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that's going to come

on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. I'm coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so no one will take your crown. The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Revelation 3:7-13

The city of Philadelphia was located 125 miles inland – 30 miles SE of Sardis and served as the gateway to the east as the most eastern city on the mail route. The city was established in 189 B.C. by Eumenes II to honor his brother Attalus II – hence the name **Philadelphia** referring to a *brother's love*.

The city was established at the crossroads of the main north/south – east/west thoroughfares connecting the Roman Empire. Kind of the way I-75, I-85, and I-20 converge in Atlanta. But the reason it was founded was for the purpose of spreading Hellenism – that is, Greek culture/language and Roman rule to the east.

It's interesting to note that the church at Philadelphia was one of two churches that didn't receive a rebuke from the Lord but only a commendation for service.

This doesn't mean it was a perfect church but a healthy church – and this should be the goal of every church – to be **healthy**. After all, no church could ever be perfect b/c they're filled w/ imperfect people. But they can be healthy if they'll seek 1st God's will/kingdom.

Don't miss – a healthy church is a church w/ a long life span and a tremendous testimony of faithfulness.

In studying church history, we learn the church in Philadelphia was the last bastion of Christianity in this part of the world until the 14th century. Until then, the church heralded the name of Christ as missionaries at the crossroads of the world. This church could very well have the longest life span of any church in history living fruitfully for the Lord for 1,200 yrs – until the Ottoman Empire/Islam conquered the region leading to a martyr's death. We learn from this church that it's possible to have long significant life when the church is healthy; but not so much for an unhealthy church.

So, what's required for a church to be considered a healthy, missionally-driven church that pleases God and stands the test of time?

Look at vs. 8 – *I know your deeds. I've placed before you an open door no one can shut. I know you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*

I believe we find in this verse (5) essential traits to a healthy, missionally-impacting church.

I We must be **FAITHFUL** in Service

I know your deeds – what Jesus is saying to this church is that I have reviewed your actions, attitudes, and ambitions and they're in the right place. Your heart, mind, and service are proven to be set upon pleasing God and fulfilling His G.C. In other words – their eyes were truly fixed on Jesus.

Meaning – this wasn't a church sitting around waiting for ministry to come to it. This was a gathering of believers going out under the leading of the H.S. to engage the people and opportunities around them.

The idea is that their service had been weighed and vetted – and it came back true. They were faithful to the calling upon them to be the witness of God. **They were hearers and doers of the Word.**

I wonder how many churches/Christians can pass the sniff test today versus how many only look good from afar? I can assure you of one thing – our current conditions will absolutely sift the wheat from the tare.

This week, Pastor Craig sent me a quote from another pastor correctly assessed and said – *Sadly, most people today have been disciplined in how to go to church but not how to follow and live like Jesus.*

Jesus is far more concerned that we **BE** the church than we **GO** to church – that we **LIVE** His Word more than we **TALK** about it.

II We must **THRIVE** on God-given Opportunities

I've placed before you an open door no one can shut

I'm a big believer in God opening doors and creating opportunities for us to engage in His will. Often times these opportunities come in a challenge (like David before Goliath – or Paul/Silas in a Philippian jail – or thru a worldwide virus), but however they come, they create opportunities for His people to show His love and grace to the world around them who are looking for hope, peace, grace, and salvation.

The picture here of Christ opening a door symbolizes God creating an opportunity for the believers at Philadelphia to serve others to relationship w/ God.

Example – while many Christians might've been put off by having to relocate their ministries online last Sunday in light of the virus – the Gospel was shared to countless millions around the world. While I don't have the numbers on what occurred thru our ministries – I did hear of a church that normally has 3,000 in attendance on-campus every week have over 21,000 online last Sunday.

What might've appeared to be an interruption of our brand of Christianity has actually turned into a real opportunity for the church to have a true G.C. impact. We can either THRIVE and walk ALIVE in this opportunity or we can shrink/shrivel up.

Now here's what we all can't miss – the next (3) traits are what dictate whether or not we thrive in a healthy walk and in a healthy faith community.

III We must **REMAIN** Dependent on God

I know you have little strength...

This isn't a slight or negative comment about their inability, but a commendation on their dependence.

The church at Philadelphia was a small but potent gathering of believers. Yet while they might've been small in number, thru them God was having a great impact on their city and on people passing thru their city.

I know you've heard this statement before, but it needs to be said again – ***the true measure of a great church isn't its seating capacity but it's sending capacity.***

It's not about how many people come to church to hear about Jesus but how many people go from church into the world under the leading of the H.S. to share about Jesus. Why? b/c the G.C. was never intended to occur where the church gathers but where it scatters.

This is the essential truth of the Christian life – it's not about what we do for Jesus in our ability/ingenuity – it is about what God does in/thru us thru His ability and our surrender. **We're to abide and He provides.**

I am the Vine and you are the branches, if any man abides in Me and I in Him, he will bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5

Hand/Glove – My hand is God and the glove is you and me. Apart from the hand in the glove, the glove can do nothing but lay there – dormant. But when the hand enters into the glove, the glove is allowed to participate in everything the hand chooses to do. Apart from the hand, the glove is impotent, but under the influence of the hand, the glove has power/potential.

III We must **WALK** in Obedience

...yet you have kept my Word...

Simply put – God's Word is His will. Everything we need to know about life can be found in His Word.

All Scripture is inspired by God (God-breathed) and is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

This means the Bible is the inspired, infallible, and authoritative breath of God. Its Divine truth given to us to direct our lives to God and to His will. It provides us w/ truth to **build** our lives upon giving us direction and boundaries, truth to **confront** us when we step in a direction opposite of God's heart/will for us, truth to **redirect** our lives back to Him, and truth to **restore** and reinvigorate our lives moving forward.

The key to God's Word is being more than a hearer and even studier – it is being a **DOER**.

My brothers, take note: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, b/c man's anger doesn't produce the righteousness God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that's so prevalent and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it, they will be blessed in what they do. Those who consider themselves religious and yet don't keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion God our Father accepts as pure/faultless is to look after orphans/widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. Jm. 1:19-27

This means, listen to the Bible b/c it is **God speak**; and then under the inspiration/guidance of the H.S. – **go and live it**. Put it into practice by loving others the way Jesus loves you and caring for others in the manner you would want others to treat you.

IV We must **PROCLAIM** God's Name

and have not denied my name.

Jesus was praising them for their **profession of faith**. Not only did they live for Him, but they boldly shared His name. Healthy Christians unashamedly talk the faith.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, b/c it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." Romans 1:16-17

Under Roman Law, annually, citizens of the Empire were called on to burn incense and publicly declare, "Caesar is Lord." This was a requirement to be hired for a job and to be a part of an occupational guild – their version of a trade union. To refuse to make such a declaration was the kiss of death and an invitation for persecution.

Yet, in spite of this threat, the believers in Philadelphia said, “We’re not going to bow to Caesar b/c he is neither my god nor my Lord. Instead, we will publicly declare the Jesus is Lord!”

But more than standing up for their conviction that Jesus is the One/only Lord/Savior, they lovingly and gently – and equally important, regularly shared the story of Jesus w/ anyone and everyone the H.S. led them to engage w/ the message of His love/grace.

Got to ask - Have you ever been guilty of denying the name of Jesus? Whether at school or work – or around friends who don’t follow Jesus. Have you ever been guilty of denying you know Him either by your words or your actions? Jesus praised this group of believers b/c they kept on naming the name of Jesus no matter what it cost them this side of heaven.

Can I close by telling you that more so now than ever, our world needs for Christian to live our faith and to share our faith? God has opened a door for ministry.

Several yrs ago, as most of you know, God opened a door and then shoved me thru it. It was a door that took me out of the church-place and into the marketplace. And I must confess that I didn’t go willingly. Yet in this season of life, I not only had my calling refreshed, but God opened my eyes to the ministry/mission field that most of you enter into on a daily basis.

Can I be honest? It was an amazing season of ministry. Once I embraced the open door, I began to see God provide me w/ one ministry opportunity after another. I have never shared my faith as a pastor like I had opportunity as a businessman. Day after day and week after week, God provided one opportunity after another. I just needed to have the spiritual health and courage to trust in the leading of the H.S. and share His love/grace in word and in deed.

Church, I truly believe that God has opened a new door of ministry for His church in this pandemic. And He has thrust upon each of us an opportunity to be His hands, feet, and voice. The question is whether or not we will choose to settle on *doing* church or step up to **BE** the church.

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