

October 13, 2024

Revelation 3:7-13

It's officially Fall and therefore, Harry Potter season- it's Autumn when many people rewatch the movies and reread the books, including Maddie and me, because it's a beautiful, powerful story, and I know that many of you feel the same way! One of the things that makes these books and movies so great is that it proves something we all know to be true, but constantly forget:

Appearances are often deceiving. In the first book, Harry and his friends know that the evil Wizard Voldemort is working to steal a precious stone that could bring him back to physical life, and they believe that the dark, moody, severe Professor Snape is the one doing Voldemort's work- that's what it seems like. Yet, in the end of the book, it's the seemingly kind, gentle, meek, and frail Professor Quirrel! It's a huge twist! Throughout the books, Professor Snape is constantly making the lives of Harry and his friends as miserable as possible, and when Voldemort returns to power, Snape is right hand man. But toward the end of the final book, we find out the Snape has been good all along, everything he did that seemed wrong, was actually all so that Harry could defeat Voldemort for good. Appearances can be, and are, deceiving. (And if none of that made sense, go read the books or watch the movies. They're tremendous.)

The same was true 2000 years ago during the beginning of the Christian church. As we saw last week with the church in Sardis, their appearance was very deceiving. They looked active, alive, prosperous, vigorous, healthy, and Jesus says that that church is dead! Here, the opposite is happening with the church in Philadelphia. Jesus himself says that they have little strength. From what we know about early churches, we can say this: In a city known for its wealth, being on the major ancient highway that merchants took when trading with India and other Asian countries, the church in Philadelphia was poor. While the city of Philadelphia was prosperous and thriving and alive, from the outside, many people would have called the church there a "dying" church. While Philadelphia was known for its schools and educational prowess, grandeur and wealth, the Christians seemed simple, uneducated, unimpressive, and weak. But according to Jesus, they're alive and thriving. They receive no criticism from Jesus, just encouragement for **a Faithful, struggling Church. And the two major points Jesus makes here are these: 1. The Door is always open. 2. Don't let anyone steal your crown.**

**1. The Door is always open.** Jesus uses a lot of "door" language in the first part of this letter. Jesus identifies himself as having the "Key of David," and he claims that what he opens cannot be shut, and what he shuts cannot be open. What's he saying? In the Old Testament, in the Kingdom of Israel after David was king and his descendants sat on the throne, the "Key of David" was essentially control over the treasury of the nation. The one with the "Key of David" was the one who controlled where funds would go, and this person had to be trustworthy- some of the people would just give off the money and wealth to their rich friends and not help the poor like they should have. Jesus is saying that he has this key on the grander scale- that the blessings and privileges and power of his kingdom is in HIS hands and no one else's and therefore the door is open because he says it's opened- no one can close his open door. Why is he saying this?

Because these Christians in Philadelphia had seen many, many doors slammed in their face- both physically and figuratively. Like many cities in this part of the world, there was a community of ethnically Jewish people which had likely been there for centuries. These communities were typically the first places where Christian missionaries would go because the Jewish people were God's chosen people- they had the Old Testament, they were expecting the savior who would come and save them from their sins, and were typically the first to believe in Jesus. The church in Philadelphia was likely heavily Jewish, but not all the Jewish people embraced Jesus as their God. Why? Because Jesus didn't just claim to be a prophet with a new teaching, he claimed to be the God of the New Testament. Please understand, Jesus was not founding a "new religion" when he came. Judaism is not the true religion of the Old Testament. Jesus very clearly claims to be the God of the Old Testament, whom the Jews worshiped. Many Jews had a hard time with that. Jesus was a suffering savior- the way he defeated his people's true enemies was through dying on a cross, something taught in the Old Testament as well. Jesus taught, and the Old Testament teaches this as well, that God's salvation is for all people, not just one ethnicity- the Jews, including Jesus' disciples, struggled with that. Ultimately, Jesus, along with the Old Testament, taught that we are saved by God not through obedience to his Law- we all are sinful and disobedient- even the religious leaders- and must be saved by a sacrifice to die in their place, not their own obedience. Just like in the case of Jeremiah, Jesus was rejected by the religious authorities and his life was ultimately taken by them. The Christians in Philadelphia were dealing with something similar. Because they worshiped Jesus, the doors of their friends and family were slammed shut. The doors of the Synagogue were slammed shut. Their families and religious leaders told them, "You are traitors. You are abandoning the God of your people. The door to Heaven is closed to you." and Jesus says, "They're wrong. They aren't Jews, not in the way that matters. They aren't my people. They are rejecting the God they claim to worship, and they will have to bow at your feet on the final day and admit it. They are wrong." Please understand, Jesus isn't being antisemitic. He himself is a Jewish man and so were his first followers. The point is that what makes Christianity, both the Old and New Testament, radically different than any other religion is that your status in God's family has nothing to do with your race, your gender, your social class, your moral accomplishments, in fact, it has nothing to do with anything that you do. What opens the door to Heaven is not what you've done, but what he has done in your place: Jesus' perfect obedience to his own law that you disobeyed, and his death in your place. That is why the door is open, and if Jesus opened, no one is going to close it. Therefore...

**2. Don't let anyone steal your crown.** I know what some of you are thinking: "Yeah, Pastor. We know. We know the door to Heaven is open, we know that Jesus saves us by grace, We know. We hear this every week." Perhaps, but I guarantee that you forget it every week as well. Because even the most faithful and sound churches like the one in Philadelphia needed to be reminded and given a warning: Don't let anyone steal your crown. What do you think was the major temptation of this church? From what Jesus says, it was a bit unique- forgetting who truly

opens the door, whose opinion really matters. I myself deeply struggle with this. When I first got the call here to St. John's, I was walking through the Seminary halls a few weeks later and a professor came up to me and asked how I was feeling. I admitted that I was pretty nervous. He asked why. I was honest. I was afraid of failure. I was afraid that my preaching would be boring or uninteresting and the relatively small church would lose members and the church might close its doors and it would be my fault. I said I was nervous about Campus Ministry. There's a lot of Lutheran students here, and I would have to report my numbers to my supervisors, the Synod higher ups. What if my numbers were too low? What if students thought I was boring and weird and I'd have to explain to people that I wasn't good enough? What would the pastors who I look up to think about me? My teachers would be disappointed in me. They'd think less of me and figure, "Yeah, I guess Sam isn't one of those guys." I expected the professor to encourage me and say, "No Sam, you'll do great!" He didn't. He said, "You need to fix your theology. The reason you are so insecure is because you've forgotten whose opinion really matters. Who cares what I think? Who cares what your supervisor thinks? Who cares what your church thinks? Who cares what you think? The only one whose opinion is worth your time is the creator of Heaven and Earth, and he thinks you were so valuable that he was happy to suffer Hell for you, and now he's ravished by you. Who cares what anything else thinks?" He was right- Jesus placed a crown of glory on my head, and I was letting people steal it by worrying about what they thought about me.

I can't be the only one. Some of you are so desperate for your parents' approval it keeps you up at night, it drives you to work so hard just so they can be proud of you. Some of you are so afraid of being ugly, being weird, being rejected by your friends or your Mr. or Mrs. Right. Some of you are so insecure about your grades, your academic performance and you just desperately want to get that internship, that grade, that professor's attention. Some of you spend way too much time wondering what your boss, your coworkers, your classmates think about you- do they see you as hardworking and competent? Some of you care how many people like your tweets, tik toks, and instagram posts, and you make yourself sick with envy when others get more than you. Why are you so afraid, so insecure, so exhausted, so worried about what others think about? Because in those moments, you have let others steal the crown that Jesus has put on your head when he declared you to be absolutely worthy, absolutely enough, absolutely perfect when you were baptized and what he continues to declare about you as you hear about what he's done to make you his own. You've forgotten, and you've made their opinions more important than his. Fix your theology. In the end, is it going to matter what your friends, your boyfriend, your professor, your family, your followers, your boss, or even you think about you? No, only Him. And he is ravished by you. He delights in you, all because of what Jesus has done in your place. You didn't even have to earn it.

I'll end with this: look at what Jesus promises to his people- it's a bit bizarre. Philadelphia was known for having horrible earthquakes, and when one would hit the city and people would

evacuate because the tops of the building would fall down. But the pillars would often remain- and Jesus uses this picture to promise what his people have in him. To use the language of the picture, you are going to have earthquakes that shake you. You are going to disappoint someone. Someone will reject you. Someone will look down on you. They will label you: “Ugly, incompetent, weird, awkward, a failure.” And they might be right. But that’s not what defines you. Jesus declares you to have his name, his place carved into you- that is who you are. You may fail at some things. Not everyone is going to find you attractive. There will always be someone with more gifts, more success, more likes, more approval. Who cares? That may shake people, but not you. Because that doesn’t define you- Jesus does. That means in the end, when Jesus comes and the world is terrified, you won’t be. Because you know who Jesus has declared you to be and the crown of glory he’s put on your head. The God of the Universe doesn’t think you are a failure. He’s not disappointed in you. He’s delighted by you. In his eyes, you’re perfect, victorious, glorious, and flawless. Who are you to tell him he’s wrong? Amen.