

Main Idea: If we are to be a church that pleases the Lord, we must focus on three matters revealed in Revelation 3:7-13.

- I. We must focus on the character of the Lord (7).
 - A. He is holy.
 - B. He is true.
 - C. He is sovereign.
 - II. We must focus on the commendation of the Lord (8-10).
 - A. The church must be committed to its mission (8).
 1. The church used its strength.
 2. The church kept the Word.
 3. The church did not deny Jesus.
 - B. The church must be committed to endurance (9-10).

Two promises that will enable us to endure...

 1. Jesus will take care of the antagonists (9).
 2. Jesus will take care of us (10).
 - *He will deliver the church.
 - *He will try the world.
 - III. We must focus on the coming of the Lord (11-13).
 - A. We must live like we believe He is coming (11).
 - B. We must know He will reward those who do (12-13).
 1. He will give a special position.
 2. He will give a special name.
- A Personal Question: Who are you living to please?
1. Make it your aim to please Christ.
 2. Make pleasing Christ a daily matter.

"We aim to please." You might hear those words if you went to a top-notch restaurant for a fine dinner. Your waitress was pleasant, your meal delicious, the atmosphere relaxing, and the evening delightful. On the way out at the door, the owner of the establishment greeted you warmly, and you replied, "Thanks for a wonderful evening. We had a great time!" To which he replied, "You're welcome. We aim to please!"

As a church, we aim to please as well. But our primary aim is not to please the public (at least it better not be). Our desire is to please the One whose opinion alone matters in the light of eternity--the Lord Jesus Christ.

How can we be a church that pleases the Lord? That's an important question. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to PLEASE Him." Jesus testified in John 8:29, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." Churches that please God are churches comprised of people who follow in the Savior's steps, with this consuming ambition--to please Him. Paul summed up his highest ambition in life with this testimonial recorded in 2 Corinthians 5:9, "So we make it our goal to please Him."

That's our ambition at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. We make it our aim to please the Lord. How are we doing in this pursuit? What is true of a church that pleases the Lord? We have the record of a church that pleased the Lord in Revelation 3, the church at Philadelphia. We can learn how to please the Lord better as a church by considering what Christ had to say in His sixth letter to the churches.

If we are to be a church that pleases the Lord, we must focus on three matters revealed in Revelation 3:7-13.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

I. We must focus on the character of the Lord (7).

Revelation 3:7 says, "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."

Clovis Chapell once said, "Were it my privilege to go back across the years and attend a service at one of the seven churches, I think I should choose the church at Philadelphia. Then, should I have the further privilege of choosing at just what particular service I should be present, I should select the one at which the pastor read this letter we have for our present study."¹

No wonder, for this is a great letter written to a great church. You will not find a word of criticism leveled by the Lord against this church. There is no mention of heresy or divisions. The church at Ephesus had left its first love. Not so the believers in Philadelphia. The church at Pergamum compromised, the church at Thyatira tolerated sin, the church at Sardis focused on programs instead of real spirituality. Not so the church in Philadelphia. In many ways, the church at Philadelphia resembled the church at Smyrna--both endured persecution, both encountered the wrath of Jewish antagonists, and both endured faithfully.

Here's where we must start in order to be a church that pleases the Lord. We must focus on His character. We cannot please Him without knowing Him. We cannot please Him if we do not know Him accurately. What is true of the Lord? He reveals three of His attributes in verse 7.

A. He is holy.

"These are the words of him who is holy." To say that God is holy is more than merely saying He is sinless (which He certainly is). In its most basic sense, the attribute "holy" means to be unique, set apart, one of a kind. In a sense, holiness is an "umbrella" attribute which covers all the rest of His attributes. The Lord is holy in His love--that is, He is unique in His love. No one loves like He loves. The Lord is holy in His power--no one has power like He does. He is holy in His mercy, justice, power, and faithfulness. The Lord is in a category all by Himself. But don't forget this. He Who is holy demands that we be holy (1 Pet 1:16).

B. He is true.

"These are the words of him who is...true." There are two Greek words for "true." The first (*alethes*) refers to a true statement as opposed to a false statement. The second (*alethinos*) means "real" as opposed to unreal.² Jesus uses the second here. Jesus is real. In first century Philadelphia, there were hundreds of false gods and goddesses, but only Jesus Christ is true. When we are confronted with Jesus, we are in the presence of One who is genuine.

Remember Jonah 2:8-9? "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."

C. He is sovereign.

Jesus says He is the One Who "holds the key of David." What is the purpose of a key? One day several years ago I was reminded of a key's purpose. I received a call from my wife who informed me that the key to our Geo Prizm had broken off in the ignition. The key represents control, authority, and potential. A machine capable of taking me from here to California is nothing more than a dust-collector without a key.

¹ Strauss, 78

² Barclay, 127

Jesus has the authority to open and close doors. The description grows out of what happened in Isaiah 22:15-22 (see Wiersbe). Assyria was threatening Judah, but instead of trusting the Lord, Judah sought help from Egypt. One ungodly leader, named Shebna, typified Judah, for Shebna used his position for his own gain, not the good of the people. Here's what God did. He removed Shebna from office, and put a faithful man, Eliakim, in his place. Here's what God said about Eliakim in Isaiah 22:22, "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."

Jesus is sovereign. He holds the "key of David." In Matthew 16:19 we learn He holds the "keys of the kingdom," and Revelation 1:18 reveals He has the "keys of hell and death." My friend, never forget this. He Who holds the key is in control, and the One who is in control is Jesus.

What does Jesus' key open? First, He holds the key to the door of salvation. If you want to go through the door that leads to eternal life, know that Christ holds the key to that door. And no one can open it but Him. In fact, He already opened that door. At the cross. At the cross He bore our sins, He took our penalty, He obtained our salvation. Any sinner may enter the kingdom of God now through this doorway.

Have you done so? Come to Him who holds the key *today* and He will escort you personally to eternal life. But know this. He who holds the key and once opened the door will one day shut the door of salvation. Today is the day of salvation.³ I urge you, make sure you are on the inside when Christ shuts that door.

But Jesus' key opens another door, one that He will mention later in the letter. In addition to opening the door of salvation, Jesus holds the key to the *door of service*. Verse 9—"I have placed before you an open door," the door of service, that is, as we'll see momentarily.

For now, let me underscore this. Those who enter the door of salvation must consequently proceed through the door of service. One cannot go through the door of service *until* passing through the door of salvation, for sure, but having passed through the door of salvation one *must* move through the door of service. Christ, the sovereign one, holds the key to both.

Mark Guy Pearce said it well, "Unless a man's faith saves him out of selfishness into service, it will certainly never save him out of hell into heaven."⁴

If we are to please Him, here's where we must start. We must focus on the character of the Lord. We must get our eyes off of ourselves, and look to Him.

II. We must focus on the commendation of the Lord (8-10).

Verse 8 begins, "I know your deeds." Christ is about to commend the church at Philadelphia. If we are to appreciate the church's reputation fully, we need to perceive a few important facts about the city itself.

Philadelphia was located about 25 miles southeast of Sardis. The city was established by king Attalus II (in the second century B.C.), who was given the epithet "Philadelphus" because of his love for his brother. It means "brother lover." The city was a missionary city whose job it was to spread the Greek culture and language to Lydia and Phrygia. It did its job so well that by the year A.D. 19, the Lydians had forgotten their

³ See Jesus' words in Luke 13:24-28; I am indebted to John Stott for this observation.

⁴ In John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, p. 102.

own language, and were all but Greeks.⁵ Don't forget this when we consider Jesus' words about an "open door."

The whole region was earthquake prone. In A.D. 17, an earthquake destroyed Sardis and ten other cities, including Philadelphia. Afterwards, the people lived in constant fear. Many chose to live in the rural areas outside the city, and others fled the city at the slightest sign of a tremor. That fact sheds light on Jesus' promise in verse 12 that in the heavenly city, His people will no longer "go out."

One more piece of background. After the devastating earthquake, Emperor Tiberius came to the rescue and rebuilt the city. In appreciation, the citizens renamed the city Neocaesarea ("New Caesar").⁶ Keep this in mind when reading Jesus' instruction in verse 12 about "the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem."

Now we're ready to consider Jesus' commendation of the church at Philadelphia. Why did Jesus commend this church? For that matter, what must be true of us if we are to be commended by Him? Christ commends a church that exhibits two commitments...

A. The church must be committed to its mission (8).

Revelation 3:8 reads, "I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."

Jesus' words are intriguing, "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." Back to the question, an open door to what?

Think about it. Open doors signify opportunity. Some feel this open door refers to the opportunity to enter into the Messianic kingdom. That is, since this church had been faithful to Christ, Christ was opening for them the door to His kingdom (see verse 7).

Others feel this open door signifies a door to service, specifically a missionary opportunity. Remember, Philadelphia was a missionary city. The church, apparently, was a missionary church to which Christ gave the opportunity of further ministry.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:9, "... a great door for effective work has opened to me..." When he came to Troas, the Bible reveals a door was opened to him by the Lord (2 Cor 2:12). Paul asked the Colossian church to pray that a door of utterance may be opened for him (Col 4:3). Acts 14:27 says that Paul and Barnabas "rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles."

The Philadelphians new about missionary work. But the church's task was not merely to civilize barbarians with the Greek culture, rather, it was to move ahead through the open door with the gospel of Christ.

The point is this. The church at Philadelphia was committed to its mission. How do we know? Notice three evidences.

1. The church used its strength.

Jesus says in verse 8, "I know that you have little strength." In the Greek text, the word order puts emphasis on the word "little" (lit. "because little you have strength"). This is not a criticism. Apparently, the church was fairly small, poor, and had not had much of an impact in the city. The church was not very impressive to the eye. But it was to the Lord. Why? Because though its strength was small, it used what it had!

Perhaps you've thought, "If I just had more strength, I could do more for God." Jesus' words are corrective. Often, we don't need more strength. We need to choose to obey and use the strength we already have!

⁵ Barclay, 125

⁶ Johnson, 451

2. *The church kept the Word.*

“Yet you have kept my word.” The Word “keep” means “to guard.” In a world that resists the Word of God, the Philadelphia church obeyed the Word. Here was a church that understood authority. What Jesus said, went, not what the polls said, not what majority decided. Jesus is Lord.

True disciples keep Jesus' words. Jesus said in John 15:10, “If you obey [KJV ‘keep’] my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” We read in 1 John 2:3-5, “We know that we have come to know him if we obey [KJV ‘keep’] his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys [KJV ‘keepeth’] his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him...”

3. *The church did not deny Jesus.*

Verse 8—“...and have not denied my name.” When the world pressured them to fit in, to compromise, this church remained faithful to the name of Jesus. “There is no other way,” they proclaimed, “there is no other name by which people can be saved.”

So the church was strong, obedient, and loyal to Jesus. These are the marks of a successful church. Frankly, one problem we have in our society is the way we measure success, especially when it comes to churches. We measure the success of a church by visible results (how big is the congregation? how beautiful is the building? how many programs does it offer?). How does Jesus measure the success of a church? By looking at the church's marketing strategy? No. He looks for faithfulness.

What should our goal be as a church? To be large? To be small? To have worship services like the ones on TV? No. Our goal must be to be faithful to Jesus. A church that uses its strength, keeps the Word, and does not deny Jesus is a church that is faithful to its mission. That's a church that pleases the Lord.

And that's the kind of church to which the Sovereign Lord opened up a door, a door of additional opportunity. The church at Philadelphia may have been small, but the Lord had big plans for it. He chose to use it in even greater ways.

Beloved, we must see the doors of opportunity Christ has opened before us. If He hasn't inserted the key, the door won't open. But if He has, we must go through it.

Listen to John Stott's reflection on this matter:

“Christ has the keys. He opens the doors. Then let us not barge our way unceremoniously through doors which are still closed. We must wait for Him to make openings for us. Damage is continually being done to the cause of Christ by rude or blatant testimony. It is indeed right to seek to win for Christ our friends and relatives at home and at work. But we are sometimes in a greater hurry than God. Be patient! Pray hard and love much, and wait expectantly for the opportunity of witness. The same applies to our future. More mistakes are probably made by speed than by sloth, by impatience than by dilatoriness. God's purposes often ripen slowly. If the door is shut, don't put your shoulder to it. Wait till Christ takes out the key and opens it.”

Stott is right. Some of us impatiently try to force ministry doors open. And then we wonder why those ministries flounder. Let's be patient, brothers and sisters. If a door isn't open, wait.

“But of course many doors are already standing wide open,” Stott reminds. “Christ has used His keys. He has turned many locks and drawn many bolts. He has opened many doors, and outside are the millions who still beckon us and say ‘Come over...and help us.’”

“Have we heard their appeal? What are we going to do with our life? Are we going to feature our nest with down and line our pockets with gold? Are we bent on making a fortune and retiring young in comfort, having turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to the needs of a world without Christ? Or shall we rather scorn the way of safety and luxury, and hasten through the open doors to the needy multitudes outside?”

“This was Christ’s message to Philadelphia. His words were not addressed to an individual, nor to the ministers, nor to a select circle within the fellowship. He was writing to the whole church. It was before the whole church of Philadelphia that He had opened a door...How much impact is our local church making on its neighborhood? Are our church members being trained for active evangelistic enterprise? Are we visiting the homes of the district, teaching the young, preaching in the open air, arranging special services in which the gospel is preached, and aiming to lead our friends to Christ? These are the doors which Christ has opened. We must be sure to go through them. The key is Christ’s; but the choice is ours.”⁷

The church must be committed to its mission. Is it easy? No. It requires a second commitment for which Christ likewise commended the church at Philadelphia.

B. The church must be committed to endurance (9-10).

Life was not easy for the believers in Philadelphia. Revelation 3:9 describes the opposition, “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you.”

A church can expect opposition if it is serious about obeying Christ. We must endure. How can we? The Word of God gives us two promises that will enable us to endure...

1. Jesus will take care of the antagonists (9).

Who were they in Philadelphia? Apparently, the antagonists were some hostile Jews in the city. Christ called them the "synagogue of Satan." They claimed to be Jews, but in reality they were liars, for true Jews are those who receive their God-sent Messiah, Jesus.

What did Jesus say He would do with them? First He would make them come and bow down before the feet of the Christians, not in "worship," but in admission--"You were right! Jesus is Lord!" Then He would make them admit, "Jesus does love you."

I take this to indicate that if the church kept going through the open door of opportunity, in spite of the opposition of the sharp tongued antagonists, Christ would in time save some of the antagonists! “They’ll bow down before you, and you’ll introduce them to Me!”

That’s the first promise that enables us to endure. Jesus will take care of the antagonists. When? In His future. What about until that happens? We have a second promise to hold on to...

2. Jesus will take care of us (10).

Verse 10—“Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.” As Wiersbe states (579), "If we take care of God's work, He will take care of our battles."

Let’s ponder Jesus’ promise. “I will keep you from the hour of trial.” [the KJV renders it, “I will keep thee from the hour of temptation”]. Just what is the "hour of trial."

⁷ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, pp. 111-112.

It seems to be a reference to the events John is about to describe in chapters 6-19, the time of tribulation Jesus predicted. It's not merely a description of some localized trial, for Jesus says it "will come upon all the world." Verse 10 is an important verse for Bible scholars in understanding the tribulation period.

Notice two points Jesus makes very clear about this coming time.

- He will deliver the church.

"Since you have kept my command...I will keep you from the hour of trial."

Listen to the observation taken from the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, "This is an explicit promise that the Philadelphia church will not endure the hour of trial which is unfolded, beginning in Revelation 6. Christ was saying that the Philadelphia church would not enter the future time of trouble; He could not have stated it more explicitly. If Christ had meant to say that they would be preserved through a time of trouble, or would be taken out from within the Tribulation, a different verb and a different preposition would have been required."

What did Jesus say would happen in the "hour of trial"?

- He will try (test) the world.

In the Bible, the words translated "temptation," "test," and "try" come from the same Greek root word, meaning "to examine, to prove, to test." What will He test for? It's not like a multiple-choice test in school. The word means "to test" in the sense of an experiment or trial. After my car's been in the shop, what's the first thing I do? I take it out and test it. Why? To see if it meets my approval.

There's coming a day when the One who is holy and true will inaugurate a period of testing on this world. The Lord will prove the world for what it is--guilty--and pour out His just wrath upon it. It will be the time of messianic woes.

What should be our response in light of this? We must be committed to perseverance in keeping our mission. Charles Wesley put it this way in his hymn...

*A charge to keep I have, A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky.*

*To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill;
O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will!*

*Arm me with watchful care as in Thy sight to live,
And now Thy servant, Lord, prepare a strict account to give!*

*Help me to watch and pray, and still on Thee rely,
O let me not my trust betray, but press to realms on high.*

My friends, if we are serious about pleasing the Lord, we need to focus on the character of the Lord and the commendation of the Lord. One more...

III. We must focus on the coming of the Lord (11-13).

Jesus made an amazing announcement in verse 11, "I am coming soon." [KJV "Behold I come quickly"] Did Jesus mean what he said? Certainly. Someone might ask, "If He said soon, why has it taken so long?" Two responses. First, the word carries the idea of suddenly or unexpectedly, as well as quickly. Second, a 1900 year delay isn't

"quick" by our standards, BUT to One who considers 1000 years to be but a day, it's no problem (see 2 Pet 3:3ff.).

The real question is this. How do we focus on the coming of the Lord? Do we need to sell all our possessions, retreat to a mountain peak, and wait? No. We have two responsibilities.

A. We must live like we believe He is coming (11).

How do we do that? Jesus said, "Hold on to what you have." It's an imperative that means "to be strong, to rule." Don't give up! Hang in there! Be strong. Choose to live every day like we believe He is coming. If you knew Jesus was coming on Thursday, would you structure your day differently? If so, then structure this Thursday differently!

What's our motivation? Verse 11—"So that no one will take your crown." We lose our crown (reward) when we allow Satan or people to divert us from living for Jesus. Beloved, we are in great trouble when we stop living like we really believe Jesus is coming. He is coming and we must live like we believe it.

B. We must know He will reward those who do (12-13). Two rewards...

1. *He will give a special position.* - In verse 12, Jesus makes this promise, "Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it."

You may be thinking, "I thought there wasn't going to be a Temple in heaven." Leon Morris offers this explanation (80), "This is, of course, symbolical and there is no contradiction with 21:22, which tells us there will be no Temple in heaven. John is not in the slightest concerned to deep the details of one vision consistent with those of another. In each he is making a point with emphasis, and we should not try to dovetail one vision into the details of another."

In a city terrorized by earthquakes, a pillar would be a welcome symbol of security. In this life Christians are outcasts, not those granted special positions. That will change, as Stott rightly summarizes, "Become a pilgrim in this life and you will be a pillar in the next."⁸

2. *He will give a special name.* Notice the description of this name in verse 12, "I will write on him 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 him my new name."

An inscribed name signifies ownership--we will belong to God. The point is this. If we identify with Christ now, He will identify with us then.

Quite honestly, these rewards may sound strange to us. If Jesus had said, "Live to please Me, and I'll give you \$10 million, a Lexus, and fame," some of us would get more excited. Which reveals our problem. Our values are distorted. We are prone to live for the wrong things! What could be more worth living for than living with God forever, and knowing that God is pleased enough with us to give us His name?!

A Personal Question: Who are you living to please?

Let's take to heart Jesus' words. I urge you to make two commitments.

1. *Make it your aim to please Christ.* Not man but Christ. Only Christ matters.
2. *Make pleasing Christ a daily matter.* Not once in awhile. Every day.

⁸ John Stott, p. 113.