

## **The Three Greatest Threats to Today's Church: The Threats**

### **Revelation 2-3**

Ever since 9/11, Americans have grown accustomed to hearing about the threat levels concerning terrorist activity. That's especially true when you're at an airport, and you see the color coded signs which indicate what the current threat level is. While these don't tell you the exact nature of the threats, you at least have a sense of how serious they are.

Well obviously, there's no color coded system when it comes to the threats against the church, but we do have a clear idea as to the nature of the threats against us. They were evident in the early church and they're still a force to be reckoned with today.

We started talking about these threats last Sunday where we were reminded from the letters to the seven churches in Revelation that the threats are real, that they are internal, and that they have solutions. So based on these same seven letters, I want us to look at the nature of the threats themselves in order to be better prepared to recognize them and overcome them.

Here's the first threat.

#### **I. Faith without practice.**

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry one of the things he constantly stressed was the importance of putting your faith into practice. For example, in Matthew 7 he indicated that if anyone took the words that he shared and acted on them, then he would be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Elsewhere Jesus indicated that if we really loved him, then we would do what he said. In other words just intellectually agreeing with a certain set of biblical facts isn't enough. We have to act on them.

Sadly, however, it seems that some of his early followers didn't get the message. For in the seven letters to the churches we see were Jesus reprimanded his people for their failure to put their faith into full practice. For example, the church in Pergamum had members who were involved in immoral activity. The same problem was found in the church in Thyatira. And in the church in Sardis only a few of the members had not soiled their garments by some unnamed acts of sinfulness. And in each case they are warned that if they did not change their ways, they would find themselves facing judgment.

That message is as needed in our day as any. For some unknown reason it has become increasingly popular in our day for Christians to think that it's only necessary to believe the right things without following through to do the right things.

Consider the following results of surveys done by George Barna comparing the actions of professing believers with those of non-Christians. According to Barna's research, Christians are less likely to help the homeless and poor than non-Christians, less likely to give to a charity, and more likely to end their marriages. As to their attitudes about life, the sad tale continues. Again according to the research, Christians are no more likely to have a sense of purpose in life than non-Christians, no better at having a proper handle on their finances, and just as uncertain about moral absolutes. In other words there is a huge disconnect between what the typical Christian believes and how they actually function in the world.

Friends, this is absolutely killing the effectiveness of our churches. As I was researching this, one of the painful things I discovered was the fact that various atheist and agnostic web sites were using this very information to bolster their claim that there's nothing to the Christian faith and that they, the unbelievers, are the ones who are headed down the right path.

Now I'm not suggesting that we become legalistically rigid in our actions and live like cultural weirdos. But I am saying that we must reconnect what we believe with how we behave. So when the Bible tells us that we should control our anger, then we should actually control it. When it calls us seek the treasures of the kingdom more than the treasures of the world, then we should adjust our desires. When it says that we should treat others in the same way we would wish to be treated, then we need to actually do that. Otherwise, we threaten to undermine the very essence of our faith and of the churches we attend.

So do you practice what you believe? I don't mean are you perfect, but are you trying to actually live out your faith in your day to day activities? Can people tell you are a Christian at school, at work, and in your home because they see you living your faith? Friends if we aren't even trying to live our faith, then what kind of faith do we have?

So let me challenge you here. Take stock of the way you're living - not what you believe about it but how you actually function. And if you see some things that need to change, then by all means change them. For your sake and the sake of your church, change them.

That's the first threat - faith without practice. Here's the second one.

## II. Faith without clarity.

It's amazing to me that shortly after the church began that so many of the believers were already theologically confused or worse yet heretical in their understanding of the faith. Take the situation in the seven churches. The church in Pergamum is told that they had allowed the unknown teachings of Balaam in their congregation along with the teachings of the Nicolaitans which we also don't know much about. In the church in Thyatira a reference is made to a woman known as Jezebel who was leading many of the members astray.

Thankfully, some of the other churches managed such situations in a better way. The Ephesian church faithfully rejected some false apostles who were in their body. At the same time, the believers in both Smyrna and Philadelphia were having to deal with people who are referred to as being from the synagogue of Satan.

All of this points to a real problem with false teaching within the churches that was threatening their existence. Again in some cases those threats were handled well and in some cases not. But either way, the threats were there. And it's no different today.

Now in talking about this, we need to be careful before we slap the label of false teaching on something that may just be a difference of biblical interpretation on a secondary matter. There will always be Bible believing folks who are going to differ in their views on the end of time, predestination, modes of baptism and more.

What I'm talking about here is the departure from the very core of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Typically, false teaching focuses on two things: minimizing the uniqueness of Christ and redefining the means of salvation.

Take, for example, one of the current projects that Oprah Winfrey is promoting on her XM radio program "Oprah and Friends". Beginning on January first of this year and continuing each day through the remainder of the year, she is hosting Marianne Williamson who will be teaching lessons from a book called *A Course in Miracles*.

The Course was supposedly channeled over a seven year period from Jesus Christ to a Helen Schulman, a professor at Columbia University. This all took place starting in 1965. For many years, the Course was sort of an underground classic that circulated among the New Age community. However, with its promotion on Oprah, the Course is now going mainstream.

Here's just a sampling of what the course teaches.

- “There is no sin, it has no consequence”
- “You are God’s son, one Self, with one creator and one goal to bring awareness of this oneness to all minds.”
- “My salvation comes from me.”
- “Accepting Christ is merely a shift in self-perception.”
- “A slain Christ has no meaning.”
- “The journey to the cross should be the last useless journey.”
- “Do not make the pathetic error of clinging to the old rugged cross.”
- “The name of Jesus as such is but a symbol... It is a symbol that [is] safely used as a replacement for the many names of all the gods to which you pray.”
- “The recognition of God is the recognition of yourself.”
- “The atonement is the final lesson he [man] need learn for it teaches him that never having sinned he has no need of salvation.”

That’s not all. Currently Oprah is hosting a world wide web conference every Monday night with a man named Eckhart Tolle author of the book *A New Earth: Awakening To Your Life’s Purpose*. So far over 2 million people in 139 countries have participated in this global webinar. According to Tolle, our problem in the world is that we have allowed our illusory sense of self known as the ego and our collection of life of hurts known as our pain-body to keep us from getting in touch with our true beingness.

Our true beingness is in essence our understanding that we are one with the universal force of life which some people call God. So people like Jesus, Buddha and others were simply persons who recognized their true beingness and we should do the same. So we don’t need salvation in the biblical sense, we just need to be reawakened to our true being.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. Now obviously, these teachings are a departure from biblical truth and are nothing more than a repackaged form of new age thought and eastern mysticism. But as troubling as all this is, that’s not the part that concerns me the most. The thing that really alarms me is the fact that Oprah claims to be a Christian. In fact she was raised in a Baptist church. Yet with her celebrity status and benevolent she is single handedly feeding false teaching into the body of Christ through believers who are not grounded in their faith and cannot discern the truth.

This Oprahization of theology is just one example of the kind of faith without clarity that threatens today's church. That's why taking advantage of serious Bible study is so important. And that's more than just finding nuggets of truth to get you through your day or to help you have a better marriage and home life as valuable as that is.

We need to know what the Bible teaches about the nature of God, the person of Jesus, the state of humanity, and God's plan of salvation. For if we lose our biblical mind, we will not survive.

Now for the last threat.

### **III. Faith without heart**

This brings us back to where we left off last week - that the core threat against any church is when its members seek to carry a faith without their hearts being into it. That's exactly the message John was giving the church in Ephesus. They were told that even though they did not tolerate evil in their church and were faithfully exposing the false apostles that were seeking to infiltrate them, they had nevertheless lost their first love. In other words, though they were doing many good things, their primary devotion to Christ had been lost.

The same thing was true about the church in Laodicea. This church was told that they were lukewarm in their devotion to Christ. It's a way of saying that they were half-hearted in their love for the Lord.

It reminds me of a phrase my mom used when I was a kid and was told to clean my room. Often I would do just enough to get by and not really clean it up the way I needed to. That's when she would tell me that I had given it nothing more than a "lick and a promise." And if I didn't want another kind of licking, I'd better get in there and take care of it.

A lick and promise. That's what faith without heart is. It's when we do enough to salve our consciences that we haven't abandoned our faith. But our heart isn't in it. If the truth be told, when we're operating with a lukewarm faith, we'd just as soon not be bothered with it. We don't really want to serve, or grow or change. We just want to put in our church time and then get back to the things we really care about.

Such people nauseate the Lord. And if a church is filled with such people, its existence is surely threatened. For a heartless church has no future.

So where's your heart this morning? I mean where is it really? Do you have a true yearning in your heart concerning your relationship with Christ, or is it more of a "lick and a promise" kind of faith? If you don't like the answer you're having to give to these questions, then it's time to return to your first love - to warm up your faith again.

And that's what I'm inviting you to do as we sing our hymn of commitment this morning. Just like last week, it's about the heart. So as we sing, if you need to talk with the Lord about the condition of your heart, then I invite you to come. For an unpracticed, unclear and unembraced faith not only threatens your own spiritual vitality, it threatens all of us.

But it doesn't have to stay that way. Right now, you can come to the Lord and commit yourself to getting your faith back on track.