

## **What Christ Expects of His Church**

### **VII. The Letter to Philadelphia: Trustworthiness**

*Revelation 3:7-13*

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church  
Greensboro, North Carolina

August 2, 2020

What does Christ expect of his Church, of those people who bear his name and are identified as his followers and disciples? Thus far in our study of the letters to the seven churches of Asia found in the book of Revelation we have learned that Jesus expects his followers to love Ephesus intensely, to suffer Smyrna courageously, to be people characterized by Pergamum truth, by Thyatira holiness, and by Sardis vitality and vigilance. So far Jesus has offered the churches words of commendation (though slight in the case of Sardis) and expressions of rebuke or correction (though Smyrna receives only praise and advance warning.) The letter to the church of Philadelphia which is under our microscope this morning offers only praise, approval, and encouragement to this weak but faithful band of disciples who have endured persecution and testing but have emerged unscathed and faithful. They have proven themselves trustworthy servants of the Holy one.

With each letter examined thus far we have been seeing through the eyes of Jesus what it means and what it looks like when we are servants of a servant God and when we are faithful stewards of all that has been entrusted to us. While I am sure that the Philadelphia church had its challenges and weaknesses, it is presented here as a most exemplary congregation. Here is a community of disciples whose faithfulness is an inspiration and encouragement to any church longing to meet Jesus' expectations for its life and work. In fact, there is so much commendable and praise-worthy about the church in Philadelphia that I found myself hard-pressed to choose one singular, all-inclusive trait to focus on with you. I could have spoken of this church's steadfastness because she did the best of things in the worst of circumstances, keeping Jesus' word and refusing to deny his name when to do so was to court persecution, even death. I could have picked up on her patient endurance, her perseverance or her availability and vulnerability in the cause of Christ. Of course, another obvious choice I considered was the word commitment, which is always the challenge for would-be disciples.

In his exposition of Revelation 1-3, John R. Stott, uses the word "opportunity" to describe the church of Philadelphia. But when I think of this word and its adjective form, opportunistic, I thought it had a rather negative flavor and could well be used in a pejorative sense. Opportunistic suggests taking advantage of opportunities regardless of principles or

consequences. Yes, the Philadelphian church was opportunistic but only in the most Godly and the most principled and the most selfless of ways.

But the church bulletin was going to press and so I had to make a decision as to the rubric under which I would discuss this letter. And the thought that kept returning to my mind as I reflected our this congregation's history here and its heart that FPC in Greensboro too has been reliable, dependable, faithful, and yes, trustworthy congregation to the nth degree. But, are we in our time and in our circumstances worthy of the trust Christ has placed in us and are we still faithfully committed to remaining reliable and trustworthy in our Lord's service? Can Christ count on us as he continues his reconciliation and redemptive work? Past opportunities have been seized. Are present opportunities being embraced?

Let me tell you a little about the ancient city of Philadelphia which brings these letters alive and reveals the character of the church in that place. To begin with, the city of Philadelphia, located some 28 miles southeast of Sardis, was the youngest of the seven cities of Revelation. Founded by Attalus II in 140 B.C., it was named in honor of a brother that he loved.

The most distinguishing thing about Philadelphia was its strategic location. It was situated intentionally right where the borders of the three countries came together --- Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia. It was also on the great highway that connected the West to the East and one continent to another. Philadelphia was established as a gateway city and the hope for Philadelphia by the Hellenists was that it would spread Greek thought, Greek language, Greek culture and civilization to the barbarians in regions beyond that place. In effect, it was founded to be a missionary arm of Hellenism.

That history is what lies behind the message of Christ to Philadelphia and why he says, "I set before you an open door." Philadelphia itself was an open door of opportunity and outreach. But while its founders saw the city only as an open door for the spread of Greek culture and influence, the risen Christ sees the church in that locale also as his open door for the spread of the Gospel into all the world. The church of Philadelphia was a gateway for the Gospel, an open door through which the redeemed could go out and the unreached could be received and welcomed. This church in Philadelphia had proven itself to be exactly that. They had kept the word in the face of trial and persecution and honored the name of Jesus which they bore. They had stood firm amid great challenges and had thus become worthy of the Lord's love and confidence and blessing.

In the Scriptures the symbolism of the open door is often used to suggest two things --- an opportunity for salvation and an opportunity for effective service. Jesus says of himself, "I am the door (or gate) for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." (John 10:7-9) In our next letter Jesus will speak those memorable and

haunting words: “Behold! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you and you with me.” (Revelation 3:20) Doors must be opened and entered if salvation is to occur and if the separation between God and his rebellious children is to be bridged. Christ is that door and the Gospel is the bridge that removes the dividing distance.

So, an open door suggests an opportunity for salvation but also an opportunity for effective outreach and ministry. Paul writes to the Corinthians telling them of his encouraging missionary travel plans and says, “I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me.” (I Corinthians 16:8-9) He says of his visit to Troas: “When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord.” (II Corinthians 2:12) When Luke describes the exciting report about what the Lord is doing in Antioch through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas we read: “When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.” (Acts 14:27) And later when Paul asks his friends in Colossae to pray for his ministry he writes: “Pray for us that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison.” (Colossians 4:3)

So open doors in the Bible suggest two things --- opportunities for salvation and opportunities for service. But in fact, these are only twin aspects of one truth --- our election as God’s people. Salvation and service are two sides of the same coin. Our Presbyterian constitution reminds us in its opening chapters in the *Book of Order* of the great themes of the Reformed tradition, one being “the election of the people of God for service as well as salvation.” So... if you are among the elect it’s not just so that you can go to heaven when you die, it’s so you can get to work for God before you die!

Do you understand this truth? The church of Philadelphia certainly did. If we have been chosen and included among God’s people it is not only so that we can be in relationship with God but also that we may be used as God’s servants to bring others into this same relationship. If we are not being used, then we must question our election. If our time and talents and treasures are not invested in God’s purposes; if we are not gateways and doors through which the mercy and the message of the Gospel can be spread, what makes us think that we are among the elect servants and the disciples of Jesus?

I am not sure what our stewardship season will look like in this time of pandemic and social distancing. I know I am somewhat strange in this matter, but stewardship is an exciting time for me in the life of the church. It affords us the opportunity to examine our own discipleship, to ask what am I doing and how might I better be used to serve my God and others. Rightly understood, stewardship reminds us of what we have been given to manage as stewards and acquaints us with opportunities to be used as blessings. It forces us to ask: am I

trustworthy? Can Christ count on me like he counted on the church of Philadelphia? If ever a letter was to be written about us or our church here in the future would there be evidence of faithfulness and trustworthiness?

The one addressing this letter Philadelphia identifies himself as “the Holy one,” clearly a reference to the Lord’s divinity (Isaiah 6:3, 43: 15) and also as the one who has “the key of David.” Therefore, this door into God’s presence Christ alone can open and close at will. This is a rather cryptic reference and analogy to Isaiah 22:22 where Eliakim, a steward in King Hezekiah’s household, is entrusted with the authority, or the “Key of David,” to admit persons into the presence of the King. In other words, you and I and our church may serve as gateways and doors for the Kingdom of God, but only the risen Christ has the authority or the power to determine who passes through.

Just a few more comments and then we will close as we return to the table of the Lord after too long an absence. There are a couple of allusions in this letter which are disturbing and objectionable to the casual reader. The reference in this letter to a “Synagogue of Satan” is one that we have encountered earlier in the letter to Smyrna (Revelation 2:9), another praiseworthy and persecuted church. This is not a reference to all Jews mind you but to those Jews who were Jews in name only, who were behind much of the persecution of the early church in the Roman Empire, and who failed to live up to their own name. If John had only known how these words would be distorted through the ages by Christians engaged in anti-Semitism, he might well have chosen less inflammatory words, yet they do reflect the hostile and the adversarial climate of that day.

And when this letter speaks of untruthful Jews being brought down to bow before the feet of this church which Jesus loved we should be especially careful and conciliatory. This image, too, strikes us as offensive but it is simply a restating and a reversal of the hopes of Israel mentioned often in the Hebrew scriptures that other nations and peoples would be brought to bow before them. (Isaiah 49:23 Zachariah 8:22-) The phrase suggests the Christian conviction that the church had become the new Israel, the new elect community. The New Testament teaches that the elect of God in Jesus Christ are not the physical heirs of Abraham but his spiritual heirs who like him, live by faith. God’s people now include all people, Gentiles included, who trust in the Lord and live trustworthy lives. (Romans 9:8; 11:11) But the greater truth we need to affirm is that ultimately all nations, all peoples, all Jews and Gentiles and all Christians will be brought to bow before the feet of him who alone is to be exalted. Paul writes in the great servant passage of Philippians 2, “every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10)

The church of Philadelphia which had proven itself faithful and trustworthy and is thus promised that though they may be weak at the moment and may even be victims of the forces

about them in political and spiritual realms, they will in Jesus Christ be victors. They will be conquerors. And no one will remove their crown from them. Today the ancient city of Philadelphia is the modern city of Alashehir and I am told that of all the seven cities of Revelation, this city alone has an active Christian church.

We have often heard of faithful Christians described as “pillars of the church.” The faithful of Philadelphia are also promised that they will be pillars within God’s temple and what is more they will never have to go out of it again. This reference to not having to go out again is believed to allude to yet another feature of life in Philadelphia. This city, like Sardis that we last considered, was also destroyed in the great earthquake of 17 A.D. and also had to be reconstructed. But historians tell us that the quakes continued with aftershocks and tremors for decades in Philadelphia and the citizens were forever running in and out of their homes and structures into the open fields to avoid possibly being crushed by a falling stone and timber. So to tell the trustworthy of Philadelphia that as pillars in God’s house they will never have to go out again is simply a metaphorical way of saying they will be secure and safe with God and will have no reason for fear. What is more, they will be marked with the name of God and will be citizens of the New Jerusalem, the former Jerusalem having been destroyed by the Romans some 20-25 years prior to the writing of this letter. So the faithful of Philadelphia could entertain hopes of a new, safe, and secure home with God beyond the times of their trials and tribulations. Their spots within God’s house were already reserved so the risen Christ is here telling them to be encouraged.

Like Philadelphia, First Presbyterian Church is strategically located and is even known as a gateway city. We too have tremendous opportunities for salvation and service. Many people come through these doors, visitors, and members alike, who need to be brought into a vital relationship with the risen Lord and who also need to be employed in his faithful service. Will we be found faithful to this challenge? Can Christ count on his disciples in Greensboro? Does Christ consider us trust-worthy? Your commitment and mine in the days to come will determine that.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

