

Intro Sermon  
LL&L  
Revelation 1  
09/10/2023

## Intro to Churches

Tim. Pastor. **Revelation 1. Pray.**

### **What does it mean to be a successful church?**

That was a question asked to me by a more experienced church planter about 6 months prior to moving to Charlotte and a question I have returned to often over the past three years.

What does it mean to be a successful church?  
How do we know if Citizens Church is “successful?”  
What are the metrics for that?

There are some in the church world who would say success is measured by the three B’s – bodies, buildings, and budgets (pastors love alliterations).

Maybe the really spiritual ones add a 4th – baptisms. Success is defined by the number of people in your church, how nice your facility is, how much money your church has and how many people you lead to Christ.

But is that true? Is that how you measure success?  
Are the number of people in worship, or one day getting our own building, or the amount in an annual budget evidence of our success?  
Is it the number of changed lives, healed marriages, developed leaders, is that the metric?  
Is it the amount of social good we do in the city to care for the poor and the marginalized?

### **What does it mean to be a successful church?**

That question is at the forefront of our series we are heading into over the next few months, a series we’re calling *Letters, Lampstands, and the Lamb*.

We’re going to be looking together at the opening chapters of the book of Revelation, where Jesus Himself (the Lamb of God), through the apostle John, writes 7 letters to 7 prominent churches (called lampstands in Revelation 1) in Asia Minor, or modern Turkey, detailing for them what it means to be a successful church.

Letters to the lampstands (the churches) from the Lamb (Jesus Christ).

And what we’re going to see, as we look at each of these letters, is that the answer Jesus gives to this question – “what does it mean to be a successful church” is this – **success is faithfulness to Jesus.**

Success is not numerical growth, not a building, it’s not a budget amount...it’s not even the amount of people that come to faith in Jesus (though those are not all bad things in and of themselves).

### **Success for a church, according to Jesus in Revelation 1-3, is faithfulness to Him.**

**Specifically, faithfulness in 4 things:**

- **In doctrine** – what a church teaches and believes.
- **In holiness** – how a church lives out those beliefs.
- **In love** – an earnest desire and affection for Jesus.
- **In patient suffering** – how a church patiently endures the trials of this world as they wait for Christ to return.

That's success. That's the aim of these letters to these 7 churches.

**But that's not just success for these 7 churches**, because while these are letters to specific churches and specific people 2,000 years ago, they speak just as much the words of Jesus to us today.

Every challenge, rebuke, warning, encouragement we see given to these 7 churches are just as much challenges, rebukes, warnings, and encouragements to Citizens Church. All with the goal of pushing us to be more successful, meaning more faithful to Jesus as His people.

**Intro to Sermon**

**And that brings us to what we're going to cover today.**

As we'll explore in detail in the weeks to come, these letters are not all rainbows and sunshine. This is not "7 love letters from Jesus". These words are difficult, direct, and disciplinary. They are full of warnings, rebukes, and commands to repent. Letters from Jesus Himself, that if we're thinking clearly and are open to them, should make us pause. That are going to be difficult to hear, difficult to accept, and difficult to obey.

**Which is why this intro sermon is so important. Because today is the fuel for our obedience fire. Before we get into the what and how of faithfulness to Jesus in the next 7 weeks, we first must look at the "why".**

Because, and we've said this before, "I'm supposed to do this" and "I'm not supposed to do that" is not a sustainable way to live the Christian life. You have to see something bigger. You have to be driven by something much more captivating than just "ought to's". You have to understand and be caught up in a greater "why".

**Harper – "BUT WHY?".** I'm learning this the hard way right now. We've officially reached the "why" stage in the Olson household. Everyone told me it was going to come, and it's here. It's Harper's new favorite question to any instruction we try to give her. ANY instruction we try to give her.

- Put your shoes on. Why?
- Let's clean up the playroom. Why?
- Take your plate to the sink. Why?

And even though I hated this answer as a kid, my gut reaction now is to just say what? "Because I said so." Right parents? But that's not going to get her through life, is it?

When she's a college sophomore and she needs to do the dishes so her roommates don't hate her, she can't be motivated by "dad told me to." That's not a sustainable way to live. She has to understand the deeper why underneath it.

And that's true for us in the Christian life as well. We have to understand and be caught up in the greater why.

- You have to grasp the "why" behind "repent and return to your first love."
- You have to be convinced of the "why" behind "repent of your sexual immorality."

- You have to be moved by the “why” behind “stay faithful even in suffering.”

### **You have to get the greater why.**

And that’s where John starts us. Before the letters, before the commands to repent. Before the challenges to remain faithful in doctrine, life, love, and suffering...John starts with the why.

That’s made clear in verse 19 where Jesus says to John – **19 Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.**

The “therefore” grounds the letters of chapters 2-3 in what John says in chapter 1. And so that’s where we’ll start today.

- Next 7 weeks - How to be a church faithful to Jesus.
- Today – Why we are a church that is faithful to Jesus.

**John’s going to give us three reasons we’ll see as we work through chapter 1 together:**

### **WHY WE ARE FAITHFUL TO JESUS:**

- 1. What He has done**
- 2. What He will do**
- 3. Who He is**

### **Reason #1 – What Christ Has Done (v4-6)**

The first reason we as the church are faithful to Jesus is because of what Christ has done. Take a look at the passage starting in verse 1...

**1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.**

**4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.**

The first reason we live as a church faithful to Jesus is because Jesus is the one who first made us the Church. We are the Church, because of the work of Christ, therefore faithfulness to the one who brought us to Himself and brought us together just makes sense. You get that? The reason why we live faithfully for Christ, is because Christ was first faithful to us.

**How? Look at what the text says...**

**He freed us from our sins by his blood.** The message of the Scriptures is that you and I, and all of humanity, are born under “bondage to sin”. We are slaves to sin. We are dead in sin. We think we’re free, but in reality we (Rom 6) are slaves to our own passions and desires that wage war within us. And yet Jesus takes on flesh, enters into humanity, lives the perfect life we cannot live, and sheds his blood on a cross so that you and I can be freed from sin. Freed from bondage.

Free from shame and guilt and condemnation and judgment.. He has purchased us into the kingdom of God by the shedding of His blood.

**Not only that, he has also made us a kingdom and priests to God.** The language John is using here is meant to point us to the fact that we are facilitators of God's presence. That's how priests functioned in the OT. They were mediators between the presence of God and the people of God. They would enter God's presence on behalf of God's people. But John says that is now true of all of us – all who trust in Jesus are now priests.

Meaning – Jesus, by his blood, has not only freed us from sin but now welcomed us into the presence of God. We live as facilitators of God's presence in the world. How? By the indwelling Holy Spirit who now lives within all of us who trust in Christ.

**In other words – reason #1 for why we live faithfully for Jesus is because of the gospel!** What Christ has done through his life, death, and resurrection.

The gospel motivates us and fuels us into the long-haul Christian life. The gospel is the central rallying point behind how we grow and live and continue to live faithfully for Jesus.

The good news of what Christ has done for us through his life, death, and resurrection – through the shedding of his blood – is what we return to over and over again.

**Too many Christians think the gospel is simply Christianity 101.** It's the basics you have to believe and understand but then you move on to "deeper things". Jesus died for me. I believe. Now I'm a Christian, so give me the steps to living like a Christian. Give me "the real stuff." Give me the "deep stuff". Give me that technical insight about that one random Hebrew word in Exodus 15. Give me the best 5 steps you have to a Godly marriage.

But listen to me – the gospel isn't just the beginning point for the Christian life, it is the reality we return to for all of the Christian life. It's not just the diving board, it's the swimming pool!

**Timothy Keller – "The gospel is not just the A-B-C's but the A-Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom."**

This is why one of the things we try to emphasize strongly in our community groups, when it comes to helping each other look more like Jesus (That's the #1 goal of CGs), is that we would be a people of **good news > good advice.**

That when someone confesses sin the first response is not "here's what helps me" or "Here's what you could try" but rather "here's what Christ has done! Here's the good news of the gospel. Helping you remember this, ground yourself in this, is way better than any 3 steps I can give you."

Don't rush past that in your groups. Practical tips are not bad, but let's give good news before we give good advice. Because the gospel is how we change. A growing and greater awareness of what Christ has done for us, the identity He gives us freely through His own merit, that is what changes us in a lasting way from the inside out. Going deeper into the gospel is how we grow, how we remain faithful.

Faithfulness to Jesus starts by remembering what he has done for us. It starts by grounding ourselves in the gospel. Christ has freed us by his blood and made us priests to God.

## **Reason #2 – What Christ Will Do (v7-8)**

Our obedience is not simply grounded in what Christ has done, the gospel also has a future aspect to it as well. We live faithfully to Jesus because of what He will do. Look with me at v7...

**7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. 8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”**

This was the whole point of last week’s sermon. Won’t spend a lot of time here, just encourage you to go back and watch/listen to that. John is reminding us, our faithfulness to Jesus is grounded in everything Garrison said last week – Because Jesus rose again, he won the victory of satan, sin, and death. He is the true victorious conqueror of evil.

And we’re promised that one day He is going to return. And those who trust in Him, who hold fast to Him will receive the spoils of that victory – an inheritance, a kingdom, a place with God forever. New resurrected bodies in a new heaven and a new earth.

And John says – this promise, that Jesus is victorious and we will share in His victory, then drives us to faithfulness to Him. We know he wins. We know he is the true conqueror of satan, sin, and death and so we hold fast to Him as we also conquer/defeat/strive for victory over our temptations, our trials, and our sufferings.

This is an idea we’ll see John come back to at the end of each letter. He’ll say the same phrase – “To the one who conquers.”

- **Revelation 2:7: To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**
- **Revelation 3:5: The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.**

But our conquering, our victory over temptation, suffering, over trial and pain – is not a white knuckle, grit your teeth and bear it, it is a conquering available to us through the conquering of Christ.

How do I know that? Look at what John says in **Revelation 5:5 – 5 And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”**

**David + Goliath.** I think the best picture we have for this is the story of David and Goliath, 1 Samuel 17. You know the story? David, little shepherd boy, kills the 9 foot tall giant with a stone and a sling? We read that story completely wrong. We think that story shows us how to be like David. How, with God’s help, we can conquer our giants.

Here’s the deal – you and I are not David. You know who we are? The scared to death Israelites shaking in our boots because of the giant that stands before us. You’re not David. David points us to Jesus. Jesus is the shepherd king who slays the giant. We are the ones scared out of our minds, until we see the giant fall. Until the shepherd king cuts off the head of God’s enemy, and then what do we do? We gather up our weapons and we charge the enemy with a roar.

That’s the picture John paints. Jesus is the conqueror. Jesus is the one who conquered the enemy. And because He has conquered, we then face our temptation with humble confidence. We face our suffering with humble confidence. This doesn’t have to win. Jesus offers me His victory. I can remain faithful to Him through this trial, through this test, through this temptation.

We live faithfully now, even though it's difficult, even though it's painful, even though you're suffering, even though everything in us wants instant gratification and ease and comfort, even though it's hard to say "no" to ourselves and "yes" to God, because Jesus has conquered, and he offers us a victory.

### **Reason #3 – Who Christ Is (v9-16)**

So we stay faithful to Jesus because of what He's done, because of what He will do, lastly – we stay faithful to Jesus because of who He is.

**9 I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."**

So John gives the overview of this vision in v9-11 – He hears a voice like a loud trumpet tell him to write a letter to the 7 churches. Then we read this in v12...

**12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. 17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."**

Now, I don't know what picture you have in your mind of Jesus, maybe fair skinned long haired hippie holding a sheep, or maybe Jonathan Roumie from the Chosen – idk but chances are it's not eyes like fire, hair like snow, feet of bronze, face like the sun, holding stars in his hand and a sword coming out of his mouth.

I love these portraits of Jesus in the Scriptures because we try so hard to domesticate Jesus in our culture today. To craft him into this sort of hippy, peace sign, pacifist that suits our every whims and wants. But if we're willing to be intellectually honest, the Scriptures just don't let us do that. This picture is bold, brass, scary, terrifying.

There's a reason John says this in v17 – **17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.**

Are you kidding me? Which for the record, is the response basically everyone has in the Scriptures when they see Jesus in His glory and holiness.

**So let's spend a minute just looking at what's being portrayed about Jesus here in the text. It's full of all sorts of imagery pointing to truths about Jesus:**

- "Son of Man" – Messiah
- Long robe + Golden Sash – Kingship. He rules and reigns in power.
- Hairs like white wool – Daniel 7 – description of God – Jesus is fully God
- Eyes like fire – all searching and all knowing gaze of Jesus
- Feet like burnished bronze – is a statement of purity - Jesus is holy

- Voice like the roar of many waters/trumpets – powerful. He speaks with might and authority
- Sword from His mouth – coming to declaratively and definitely judge. His judgment is right and holy and good. It is a judgment of both healing and punishment.
- Face like the shining sun – blazing, majestic, glorious
- First and the last – eternal
- Keys of Death and Hades – victorious conquering King

### **This is Jesus.**

This awesome, powerful, majestic Jesus is the one saying to the churches – repent.

This awesome, powerful, majestic Jesus is the one saying to the churches – remain faithful in suffering.

This awesome, powerful, majestic Jesus is the one saying to the churches – put aside false teaching and teachers.

### **It's this awesome, powerful, majestic Jesus that calls for our faithfulness to Him and Him alone.**

That's why at the beginning of each of the 7 letters Jesus will open by referring to one part of this picture of Him. Every single one He will include some aspect of this – “the one who has the sharp two-edged sword says this to pergamum...” or “the words of the first and the last says this to Smyrna...”

He's grounding each command, each charge, each warning, each rebuke – in the glory of Christ.

### **All About Christ**

**Do you see? The whole thing, the whole point, the whole “why” is Jesus.**

Why do we repent? Because of Jesus. Why do we correct false teaching? Because of Jesus. Why do we suffer well? Because of Jesus. Why do we seek true success of faithfulness to Jesus? Because of Jesus.

**It's all about Christ! He is the greater why!**

**That is the driving motivation for us as a church and for us as His people. That's the only thing that will sustain a holy, looking more like Jesus everyday, Christian life and Christian church – a deep love, awe, and satisfaction found in Christ Jesus.**

**What He's done to rescue us from our sin by His blood. What He will do as he returns to judge the living and the dead, and to bring those who trust in Him home to be with Him forever. And who He is – pure, holy, majestic, powerful King.**

So it's fitting that John ends the intro with the words of Jesus when he says in verse 19...

**19 Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.**

**The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.**

Lots of debate over what the angels refer to here → I tend to believe it means actual angels that watch over each church, but regardless the underlying meaning is the same – The fact that the “stars” are held in Jesus’ “right hand” means the Lord Himself protects, upholds, and guides the Church.

He is the one who holds it altogether. He is the one who keeps the Church protected, such that the gates of hell do not prevail against it. He is the Chief shepherd who leads the undershepherds to care for His flock.. He is the groom who cares for and nurtures His bride. He is the King who reigns over His Kingdom.

### **The seven lampstands are the seven churches.**

So Jesus upholds the Church, guides it, protects it, leads it, cares for it. And what do the churches do? Shine as lampstands surrounding the lamb. Meaning – they shine on the glory of Christ. They illuminate who Jesus is.

There's something about how we live, with God's presence among us, remaining faithful in our doctrine, in our holiness, in our suffering that shines the glory of Christ even brighter to the world.

It reflects onto Jesus. It shines a light onto our Savior. As we love one another, serve one another, submit ourselves to the Word of God, say "no" to sin, all of these things are radiating out the glory of Christ.

- This is why Matthew 5 calls us the 'Light of the World'. It's not about us shining our light, we're shining light onto the glory of Christ.
- This is why Ephesians 3, Paul says that through the Church the wisdom and glory of God is made known to the rules and authorities of heaven.

The Church makes much of Jesus. It follows Jesus. We worship Jesus. We live in faithfulness to Him.

Because of what He's done. Because of what He will do. And because of who He is.

### **Application**

#### **So, what does all of that mean for us this fall, over the next 7 weeks?**

I want to invite us to have two postures as we journey through this series together, and we've got 2 practices that are going to help you with that.

#### **1. Worship**

This is a series about the church, yes. But as I hope you've seen today, it's first and foremost a series about Jesus. Our faithfulness is grounded in the person and work of Christ. His glory. His sufferings. His majesty. And so part of how we learn to be more faithful is by seeing more of the glory of Jesus.

**Danny Akin – "Revelation, rightly understood, had a word for the first-century church. Rightly understood, it has had a word for the church throughout history. And rightly understood, it has a word for the church today and tomorrow. At the heart of that word, that message, is this: Gaze on the exalted and glorified Christ."**

And so to that end, I invite us to come in with a heart posture ready to worship Jesus. Ready to make much of Him. Ready to awe at Him.

But also – not just on Sundays, but throughout the week.

**\*\*Worship playlist**

**\*\*Set a goal - 15 min/day. 1 hour/week. Replace podcast w/ worship, etc.**

## 2. Humility

- Don't put ourselves above the letters/point fingers/think it's not us
- 3 things: comfort. Encouragement. When those don't happen — caveat.
- Come ready to receive, ready to repent, ready to be convicted and encouraged
- It's easy to want to come to church wanting to be encouraged. Thinking - how can what he's saying make me feel better about myself and my circumstances? But perhaps the invitations for this series is to be come really open to conviction. To pray on your way to church, "Lord, help me to see where I'm off here." To pray that for your group members too.

### **\*\*Fasting**

**Nothing grows your humility more than realizing your limits.**

**\*\*PDF OF HANDOUT – [SERIES SPIRITUAL PRACTICES \(2\).pdf](#)**

**\*\*Gospel conclusion**