

Jesus and His Churches: Philadelphia

(Revelation 3:7-13)

I. Introduction

- A. The late media expert Tony Schwartz once said this about the value of radio, “*People were born without earlids; you can’t close your ears*”
1. We can shut our eyes the light around us, but our ears are always open.
 - a. At least, that’s the theory; most of us at times at least seem to earlids
 - b. Sound waves hit eardrums, but we filter message we don’t want to hear
 - 1) So parents pause in mid-lecture to say, “*Are you listening to me.*”
 - 2) Husbands are oblivious to wives but hear every word of play-by-play
 - c. We hear only what we want to hear, and close our ears to everything else
 2. Jesus said that many would miss God’s truth for just this reasons
 - a. Some would hear his teaching, but they would not really hear (**Mt 13:13**)
 - b. This quote on eyes and ears from Isaiah follows Parable of Soils (*Sower*)
 - 1) The different soils really represent our willingness to hear God
 - 2) Are our ears too calloused or shallow or indiscriminate to hear God?
 - c. It’s no surprise He ends parable, “*He who has ears, let him hear*” (**13:9**)
- B. Jesus ends letter to 7 churches with, “*Let him who has ears to hear...*” Why?
1. They’re hard to hear; when something is hard, must LISTEN (**Rev 13:9-10**)
 - a. Some will be imprisoned and martyred; that was hard for them to hear!
 - b. So Jesus wants them to listen closely, “*He who has an ear, let him hear*”
 2. The letters to the seven churches of Asia are also be hard for us to hear.
 - a. Why? Because their evaluations are so contrary to appearances
 - 1) Church known for doctrinal fidelity is in danger of apostasy (*Ephesus*)
 - 2) Church with reputation for activity was actually dead (*Sardis*)
 - 3) Church seen as weak and poor was lauded for being rich (*Smyrna*)
 - b. These letters are hard because Jesus seems to use a different yardstick
 - 1) He doesn’t judge faithfulness by noses, nickels, programs or positions
 - 2) That bothers for that’s how we judge? So what do we do? *Listen!*
 3. Today we come to Philadelphia, a church where things aren’t as they seem

II. Church of the Open Door (Read: [Revelation 3:7-13](#))

- A. Philadelphia was located about 28 miles SE of Sardis (*next on the postal route*)
 - 1. The region was highly volcanic; Strabo calls it “*a city full of earthquakes.*”
 - a. Many people lived outside the city due to the danger of falling buildings
 - b. Philadelphia had been destroyed by same earthquake as Sardis (AD 17)
 - c. It had been rebuilt by Rome, and by AD 90 it was a flourishing city
 - 2. This letter sounds a lot like the letter to the church at Smyrna ([2:8-11](#))
 - a. Like Smyrna, there are no warnings about paganism or false doctrine
 - b. Like Smyrna, Philadelphia was persecuted by a “*synagogue of Satan*”
 - 1) When we think persecution, we think of Rome (*context of Revelation*)
 - 2) In Acts, persecution was from Jews. Same in Smyrna & Philadelphia
 - c. Like Smyrna, things weren’t what they seemed to be at Philadelphia.
- B. Philadelphia seemed to be church that had “*little strength*” ([3:8b](#))
 - 1. How was it that this church had “*little strength*” or “*little power*” (ESV)
 - a. **Numbers:** Most churches were small; typical house church = under 30
 - b. **Wealth:** Smyrna had been recognized for their poverty (*spiritually rich*)
 - c. **Status:** Most churches didn’t have a lot of social status ([1 Cor 1:26](#))
 - 1) Church was often criticized as being a religion of women and slaves
 - 2) The wealthy were viewed as the enemy of the faith (see [Jam 2:6-7](#))
 - 2. So Philadelphia wasn’t the kind of church you’d pick if looking for church
 - a. I got an email from the Fosters asking my opinion on their church search
 - 1) It’s hard to give an informed decision from a distance
 - 2) But then, it’s also hard to know much more when you have visited
 - b. Church is like an iceberg; much of its character is below surface.
 - 1) Some things are easy to see—worship, preaching, # of programs
 - 2) You have to be around for awhile before you see the true character
 - c. Choosing a church is like a marriage—comes down to commitment
 - 3. No one would have chosen Philadelphia based on what was seen
 - a. This was a small, persecuted group with little power or influence
 - b. But Jesus Himself saw this church in an entirely different light

- C. What Jesus saw in the church at Philadelphia was a great open door ([Rev 2:8a](#))
1. Things aren't as they seem; Christ's promise contrast with how things look
 - a. The church at Philadelphia seemed small, powerless and insignificant.
 - b. Yet Christ placed before it an open door of opportunity and service
 - c. The church may have looked weak, but their door was wide open!
 2. Jesus promised his disciples that He would open doors ([Matt 7:7-8](#))
 - a. This doesn't suggest, as some suppose, that God grants every request
 - 1) God isn't a vending machine into which we pop a prayer
 - 2) But God does answer; He does open door—He is involved in life
 - b. Paul asked Colossians to pray that God would open doors ([Col 4:3](#))
 - c. There were times Paul found God opening doors for him ([2 Cor 2:12](#))
 3. Jesus promises to open for this church a door which no one can close

III. The Open Door: Two Points in the Text

- A. **First**, Christ is the one who places the open door before this church
1. Jesus identifies Himself as the one who opens and closes ([3:7](#))
 - a. It's not that Philadelphia somehow found the key to church growth
 - b. Jesus holds the key; he is the one who opens and shuts the door
 2. Notice how often that Jesus uses the phrase "I will..." here
 - "I will make them [Jews] fall down at your feet" ([3:9](#))
 - "I will also keep you from the hour of trial" ([3:10](#))
 - "I will make a pillar in the temple of my God" ([3:12](#))
 - "I will write on him the name of my God...my new name" ([3:12](#))
 3. How could a little church with no influence or strength have open door?
 - a. Because Jesus Christ will act in them and on them and through them
 - b. It's easy for church to make excuses because of our size, money, power
 - 1) Other churches have so many more resources than we have
 - 2) My parents' church has 2000 members; some churches have 20, 000
 - 3) What could we do with those resources? How big could VBS be?
 - c. But doors aren't opened because of our strength or resources or status
 4. This little church had open doors of opportunity because Jesus opens doors

B. **Second**, an emphasis on faithfulness and obedience jumps out at us.

1. Jesus also introduces Himself as One who is “*who is holy and true*” (3:7)
 - a. He says “*I know your deeds.*” (3:7). Is that a good thing or a bad thing?
 - b. He says, “*You have kept my word and have not denied my name*” (3:8)
 - c. He says, “*You have kept my command to endure patiently*” (3:10)
2. What opens doors is not their strength or ingenuity—it’s their obedience!
 - a. They did not wilt under persecution or compromise with their culture
 - b. And because they obeyed, then Christ would bless them—
 - 1) They would be vindicated in front of their Jewish tormentors (3:9)
 - 2) They would miss the brunt of the global persecution to come (3:10)
3. Are we going to trust Jesus to open the doors of opportunity and service?
 - a. We show that by our willingness to obey him and follow His commands
 - b. Innovative programs, fresh ideas, new approaches—those are all good
 - c. I like the fact that some of the things we do have shortcuts and helps
 - 1) **VBS-in-Can**: Decorating ideas, activities, scripts, schedules, plans
 - 2) We can buy Sunday School literature and small group material
 - 3) We have grape juice in bottle— don’t grow and squeeze own grapes.
4. There are kinds of helps and shortcuts that can help the church in its work
 - a. But there is no shortcut for faithfulness, righteousness and obedience
 - b. Jesus is holy and true, and we as His people must be holy and true.

IV. Conclusion

A. Notice how Jesus’ letter to the church at Philadelphia ends (3:11-12)

1. When an artist finishes his masterpiece, he signs his name to it.
 - a. Jesus says that if we hold on to our faith, God will sign his name on us
 - b. Not only that, but God will make us part of his Temple—His presence
2. Stott puts it, “*If we are pilgrims in this life, we will be pillars in next.*”

B. Jesus left heaven “*Out of the Ivory Palaces*” to show us God eternal love

*In garments glorious He will come, To open wide the door;
And I shall enter my heavenly home To dwell forever more.*

C. “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*”