

THE ADULTEROUS CHURCH: THYATIRA

Revelation 2:18-29

In this lesson we discover the danger of tolerating immorality in an otherwise faithful church.

You will find more in-depth information on this lesson in the book *Escape the Coming Night*, chapter 4, pages 65-67.

OUTLINE

What defines a good church? Surely such a definition would include ministry to others, love, loyalty, patience, and progress in spiritual growth. But would it also include toleration of a known sexually immoral person? No, as Jesus makes perfectly clear.

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OVERVIEW

In all the churches we have studied up to this point a similar pattern has emerged: genuinely commendable qualities marred by carelessness in one particular area. And that area of spiritual carelessness has the effect of making powerless the other positive qualities. The church at Thyatira worked hard, loved faithfully, was loyal in service, and had great faith and patience. But there was a chink in her spiritual armor which caught the attention of Jesus, the Head of the Church. The message of repentance comes to yet another of the churches in Asia Minor, and continues to the church of today. Revelation 2:18-29 reveals the problem in Thyatira.

THE DESTINATION OF THE LETTER

Unlike some of the other cities Jesus addresses, Thyatira was not known for its grandeur, its culture, or its learning. But it was known for its commerce. It was located in a valley between two cities on one of the busiest trade routes running through Asia Minor. The city boasted numerous trade guilds—bakers, bronze workers, clothiers, cobblers, weavers, tanners, dyers, potters, and others. All had guilds, or unions, in Thyatira to protect their workers and promote their trade. Though Thyatira seems to have been the least important of the seven cities, she receives the longest of the seven letters of Christ.

THE DESIGNATION OF THE LORD (2:18)

Picking up some of the descriptive elements of Christ from the first chapter, the Lord is here introduced in a number of ways.

His Designation as the Son of God

It is important to note that Jesus introduces Himself as the Son of God. When we are introduced shortly to a woman who acts like a reincarnation of the infamous Jezebel of the Old Testament, who considered herself to be a prophetess of God, it will be important to remember that the Son of God stands in judgment over the prophet or prophetess of God. The authority of Christ is established first.

His Designation as the All-Seeing God

Second, Jesus calls Himself one "who has eyes like a flame of fire." The point of eyes being like fire is that nothing can stand before fire. It destroys everything it comes in contact with so that nothing remains hidden. Eyes of fire means that Christ sees all; nothing can be kept from the searching gaze of His sight.

God's knowledge of all things is mentioned often in Scripture. He saw Hagar alone in the wilderness (Genesis 16:13), and Jeremiah

1:24; 15:8). John the apostle tells us that Jesus knew what was in all men (John 2:24-25). Knowing what was happening in the church at Thyatira was consistent with eyes that see all things.

His Designation as the One with Feet Like Fine Brass

We learned at the beginning of these lessons that brass in Scripture is always an indication of judgment. God tells Israel that when they sin the "heavens which are over your head shall be bronze [brass]," meaning their prayers will go unheard and the blessing of rain will be stopped (Deuteronomy 28:23). That judgment is spelled out in no uncertain terms in 2:23, whereupon all the churches will know who is searching the hearts and minds of believers everywhere.

It is important for the church today to realize that the Christ who stood ready to judge the seven churches in Revelation stands ready to judge our churches today. What has changed except the passage of time? Nothing. The resurrected Christ searching the hearts of His people in the first century is also searching the hearts of His people in the 21st century. And He will also judge His church with perfect knowledge at the Judgment Seat of Christ someday. That reality gives me cold chills when I think of it. Christ is our loving and compassionate Savior and friend, but He is also our judge as well.

THE DIAGNOSIS OF THE CHURCH (2:19)

The compassion of the Lord is seen as He speaks first to the church of their positive characteristics, those things with which He is pleased in their lives.

Thyatira Was a Laboring Church

First is mentioned the church's works, which is a general reference to their good deeds. But then the more specific term "service" is mentioned. This means they were involved in ministry to others. The word for "service" is the same word from which the

yields and melts before it. It penetrates all things, consumes every opposition, sweeps down all obstructions, and presses its way with invincible power. And of this sort are the eyes of Jesus. They look through everything; they pierce through all masks and coverings; they search the remotest recesses; they behold the most hidden things of the soul; and there is no escape from them.

Joseph Seiss

word "deacons" comes, a word that means to serve. More than just a specific function or job, the reference is to their unofficial, non-mandatory acts of kindness to all people. The fact that they were a laboring, ministering church was pleasing to Jesus.

Thyatira Was a Loving Church

Even with the significant moral errors He was about to reveal to them, the church at Thyatira was still a church which exercised love. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, the greatest of the virtues is love, and the church at Thyatira exercised that virtue with nobility. It is interesting to recall that the church at Ephesus wouldn't tolerate false teachers or apostles, but at the same time they had lost their heart of love for Christ, and therefore for others. The church at Thyatira was the opposite; they had love but lacked discernment. Some churches are strong in one way while other churches are weak in the same area. Jesus points out the strengths of both and the weaknesses of both.

Thyatira Was a Loyal Church

Jesus commends their faith, expressed by the Greek word *pistis*, meaning faithfulness, fidelity, or loyalty. The saints at Thyatira were dependable and reliable. Some Christians run well at the outset of the race, but after they go for a while and the pressure is on, they drop out. However, the church at Thyatira was loyal.

Thyatira Was a Longsuffering Church

Patience was next on Jesus' list of commendable traits of the Thyatirans. Patience is the ability to be still when everything around us is storm-tossed. Patience is from *hupomone*, a word which means "to abide or remain under." Patience stays where it is, under the most difficult circumstances. It doesn't flee or quit or give up. Just as the Christians in Smyrna would not quit when they were persecuted, so the Thyatirans would not quit. They were a patient people.

Thyatira Was a Maturing, Progressing, Growing Church

There was a fifth characteristic which is less specific than the other four; indeed, it serves as sort of an umbrella under which all their positive traits fit. Their more recent works, Jesus said, are more than the first. In other words, this was a church that was maturing and progressing and growing—a church making progress in sanctification. They were more loyal, more loving, more patient, more serving than when they first began.

While this was a commendable church in many respects, that in which they were failing overshadowed all the good they were doing.

Verse 20 begins like a conversation you have with your boss in which all of your good points are highlighted. Then comes the, "But" I hope you never hear anything said to you as harsh as what Jesus said to the church at Thyatira: "You allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols." There was a cancer in the body, a weed in the garden, in Thyatira. The devil's strategy was to introduce evil into the church through a woman who promoted sexual immorality.

The original Jezebel was the wife of the wicked king of Israel, Ahab. Her father was a priest of Ashtaroath, the Phoenician equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite and the Roman Venus. Under these gods religion was divorced from morality and sexual immorality was actually made a part of "worship." Therefore, a priestess in the worship of Ashtaroath was nothing more than a prostitute. Ahab never should have married a woman such as Jezebel. She brought all her wicked religious background into the kingdom of Israel. She persuaded Ahab to build a temple to Ashtaroath in Samaria (1 Kings 16:30-31), supported 850 prophets of her immoral cult, and began systematically killing the prophets of God (1 Kings 19:2). She must have been a fearsome woman since Elijah ran for his life from her. She was the epitome of corruption, immorality, and idolatry.

The original Jezebel had been dead a thousand years, but there apparently was a woman in the church at Thyatira who was promoting the same licentious and immoral lifestyle, claiming to be a prophetess. Idolatry leading to immorality is always the pattern that surfaces, and it gets worse over time. Ephesus couldn't tolerate false teaching. Pergamos had some who practiced the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. And Thyatira "allowed" (2:20) an immoral woman in their midst. Total rejection in Ephesus became toleration in Thyatira. Jesus is about to make three declarations to address a serious sin problem in the church at Thyatira.

*If the devil cannot conquer
the church by the application
of political pressure or the
propagation of intellectual
heresy, he will try the
insinuation of moral evil.
This was the dragon's strategy
in Thyatira.*

John Stott

THE DECLARATION TO THE CHURCH (2:21-25)

The Jezebel cult gets the first message, then the Christians not involved with the cult. Finally, those who purpose to live above immorality, those who are conquerors, hear from Him.

The Message to the Cult (2:21-23)

Those involved in the Jezebel cult had been given time to repent, but apparently they (or she, the leader) had not done so. A terrible judgment is therefore pronounced upon her. She will be cast into a bed of affliction (of sickness) and those who had followed her would be cast into tribulation. I wonder if the old adage, "You've made your own bed; now you have to sleep in it," came from the judgment levied against her. Not only will she suffer, and those who have followed her, but her children will suffer as well, indeed, they will be killed. All of this judgment will take place in a way that all the churches will know that Christ is the one who searches the mind and heart of believers, that He is in charge.

The church at Thyatira represents the church of Jesus Christ during the Middle (Dark) Ages. During that period the church accomplished little for God because it sought to combine Christianity with pagan philosophy and heathen religious practice. Religious syncretism is unholy in God's sight whether in the first century, the 13th century, or the 21st century.

The Message to the Christians (2:24-25)

There were Christians in the church who did not follow after Jezebel, and Jesus spares them from any additional burden. This situation is similar to the first church conference held in Jerusalem to decide how to handle the transition of Jews into Christianity, the body of Christ (Acts 15). They decided on a minimum set of standards for Gentile believers to keep from giving offense to the transitioning Jewish believers, and laid no additional burdens on them in terms of rules or regulations. Keep it simple, the leaders were saying, and that seems to be what Jesus is saying as well. In a day when we tend to multiply rules upon rules in the body of Christ, Jesus just said, "Keep doing what you're doing—not following the Jezebel woman." Just serve God and keep doing what you're doing.

The Message to the Conquerors (2:26-29)

Finally, there is a message to the overcomers. He makes two promises to them. First, if they will stay faithful to Him, they will be given the right to rule one day. This is a reference to the day when

the saints of God will rule and reign with Christ. Second, there is the promise of the Rapture of the church. The "morning star" (2:28) seems to be a reference to Christ as the One who will come in the dark hour preceding the dawn of the kingdom of God (the Millennium). Christ is the "bright and morning star" (Revelation 22:16). To be raptured with Christ only to return to rule with Him makes being faithful a rewarding decision.

The message to the church at Thyatira is to repent if you are involved in immorality and continue overcoming if you are not involved. In a day ripe with immorality, that message of Christ applies to the church with renewed urgency. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:29).