

To Thyatira: Purify My Church
(Sermon 7 – Rev. 2:18-29)
9.25.16

Please turn in your Bibles to the Book of Revelation, chapter 2. We continue working our way through seven letters that Jesus wrote to seven different churches of the time.

We started with **Ephesus**, a church who held to sound doctrine but needed to be reminded of the importance of love. Then Jesus wrote to **Smyrna**, a persecuted church, who received no correction from Jesus, only encouragement. And then last week we heard Jesus address the church at **Pergamum**, also a persecuted church, but who battled false teaching in their congregation. Today we come to the fourth letter, addressed to the church at **Thyatira**. Let's read verses 18-29 of chapter 2...

[18] “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. [19] “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

[20] But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. [21] I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

[22] Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, [23] and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

[24] But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. [25] Only hold fast what you have until I come. [26] The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, [27] and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. [28] And I will give him the morning star. [29] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

(PRAY)

The city of Thyatira was the smallest and least impressive city of the 7. It didn't have lots of money like Ephesus, or impressive buildings like Smyrna.

Thyatira was a blue-collar town, full of working-class folks, like bakers, potters, weavers, and cobblers. That means the church there was not made up of philosophers and the well-to-do. They were average Joes trying to make a living and provide for their families. But even though this was the smallest city, they receive the longest letter of the seven.

Here at the beginning, as Jesus does in the other letters, He begins by first highlighting a specific aspect of Himself that would encourage this particular church...

[18] "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.'

Jesus points to his eyes like a flame of fire to remind the church He is omniscient – He sees everything. This is also the only place in the Book of Revelation where the phrase "Son of God" is used. Jesus is reminding this church at Thyatira that not only does He see everything, but He also has all authority, especially in light of some of the struggles they are having with their authorities, (which we will unpack in just a moment).

Thyatira was the center of the copper / bronze trade. So it makes sense that Jesus mentions His feet of burnished bronze, to remind them that He knows them, and He wants to purify them as a furnace purifies metal.

In fact, that's the common theme of every one of these 7 letters – Jesus is purifying His Church. And that's the main thought of the message today:

PROP: Through forgiveness for those who repent, or through judgment of for those who don't, Jesus will purify His Church.

Either through forgiveness or judgment, sin will be purged, and Jesus will have a Bride without spot or blemish.

In Thyatira, like most of the churches in Revelation, some Christians were being faithful, and some who were not. And we're going to unpack this letter by considering four aspects of what Jesus is revealing about Himself: Jesus sees, He purifies, He will judge, and He will reward. First...

I. Jesus Sees

[19] “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

When Jesus tells them, “I know your works”, it means He sees their lives, how the faithful are living their lives. Jesus commends them for their:

-love – genuine desire and preference for the good of another

-faith – an ongoing trust in God and His word

Love and faith are two of the most important motivations of the Christian heart. And from these two motivations come two actions:

-service – love put into action. Not just loving each other with words, but showing that love by serving one another.

-patient endurance – faith put into action, to hold on to the truth of the gospel and to live that out, even if it means persecution.

The Lord sees our motives as well as our actions. And for the faithful in Thyatira, Jesus commends them for their spiritual maturity. They are growing and bearing spiritual fruit.

And there’s one more compliment Jesus gives them, a kind of summary, when He says, “...**your latter works exceed the first**”. That means they are not stagnant and immature. They are growing, they are progressing in sanctification and good works.

Contrast this with the correction Jesus gave to the Ephesian church – that they had forgotten their first love, and they needed to go back and do their first works again. That’s not the case here in Thyatira. These Christians are growing in their faith and in their Christian walk. And according to Jesus, their lives now reflect more spiritual fruit than they did before.

What more could a church congregation ask for – to be commended by the Lord Jesus Himself for your love, your faith, your service and perseverance, and ongoing spiritual maturity!

But even these qualities could not hide some pretty glaring deficiencies in their church. So the next thing Jesus reveals about Himself is...

II. Jesus Purifies

[20] But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Because this city's economy was made up primarily of craftsmen, trade guilds were abundant (kind of like labor unions today). In order to practice your craft as a tanner or leather worker or potter, you had to be a member of a trade guild. And that also meant you had to do what your guild expected of you if you wanted to work in that town.

And just like unions today are directly connected to politics, the trade guilds back then were directly connected to temples of false religions.

That meant there was a specific idol attached to your trade. So, if you wanted to do business in Thyatira, you had to show some measure of respect or devotion to that idol. You had to take part in the festivals and the rituals of your local guild, which involved honoring those false gods, and eating meat sacrificed to those idols. And most of these festivals would often include drunkenness and sexual immorality.

That obviously presented a problem for Christians trying to make a living. They couldn't just do an honest day's work and go home. They were constantly pressured by their bosses and supervisors to compromise their Christian principles and take part in these rituals and festivals.

Now who is "this Jezebel"? Jesus says she "calls herself a prophetess", as one who claims to speak for God, but she does not. As in previous letters, Jesus pulls from an OT story to identify a current sin in the church.

Back in the OT, Jezebel was a wicked queen of Israel, married to King Ahab. Jezebel was guilty of all kinds of abominations, including the persecution of priests and prophets, engaging in and promoting sexual immorality, and idol worship among God's people. So, the name Jezebel became synonymous with spiritual adultery and sexual immorality.

In addition, Jezebel was the biblical picture of a wife leading her husband, Ahab, who was a coward. So the name Jezebel became synonymous with a domineering woman leading a weak man.

It seems that in Thyatira, there was a specific woman of influence, who was attempting to lead men in the congregation. She claimed to speak for God, but she did not. From Jesus' correction, this woman was most likely trying to convince these blue-collar Christians, these tradesmen, that they didn't have to fight against their bosses and their unions. They could take part in their company parties, their guild's festivals, and sacrifice to idols and even embrace sexual immorality.

There was a popular philosophy of the time that basically said what you do with your body doesn't matter – your spirit can still be holy and pure, no matter what you do with your body. For the common baker or potter, that would be a relief – they wouldn't have to fight that battle on their job anymore, if what she says is true.

But this is not what scripture teaches. 1 Corinthians 6 says...

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

It does matter what we do with our bodies. We belong to Christ – mind soul and body. What we do with our bodies reflects our worship – either worship of ourselves, or worship of the God who made us.

It seems that Corinth and Thyatira had a lot in common. Because in both churches, the Apostle Paul had to deal with the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. On one side, Paul made the point that idols are fake gods – they are not real. So if a Christian happened to buy meat in the market that was sacrificed to idols first, eating that meat would not defile them. It's just meat.

But Paul also pointed to the other side of the issue – that not all consciences are the same. If another Christian was convicted not to eat that meat, you should not eat it in front of them, nor encourage them to do so. Love your brother more than your steak.

It seems that this false prophetess in Thyatira pointed to Paul's appeal to the Corinthians, that idols were not real, so eating that meat wouldn't harm you. But she conveniently left out the part about preferring your brother, or the command that Christians were not to take part in any temple worship or ceremony honoring a false god.

This NT Jezebel took Scripture and twisted it for her own purposes. Enough truth to sound convincing, but enough error to lead people astray.

That's the same recipe false teachers use today. They stand in front of Christian congregations, or in front of television cameras, they quote the Bible, they use the name of Jesus, but they don't teach what Jesus taught. They don't teach the whole counsel of God's word. They use a proof-text instead of context. They value man's gain over God's glory. These are true signs of a false teacher.

But this false teaching of giving in to the world is not limited to Thyatira. The church today wrestles with that same tension - to be in the world, but not of it. To be engaged in our culture so that we can be a light and an influence for the gospel, but not so much that the culture influences us to compromise our Christian faith.

Maybe your temptation is not in attending an idol feast, but we still have our idols: idols of money, of self-promotion, of man pleasing and acceptance, idols of comfort and pride. Idols of entertainment and image. On the job, we have the pressure and expectation to go along to get along, to keep your personal beliefs to yourself - unless those beliefs line up with a secular worldview, then they are welcomed.

And there's an ever-increasing idol in our culture that Jesus calls out by name – the idol of sexual immorality, which means any sexual activity outside of a husband and wife in the covenant of marriage. That includes sex outside of marriage. It includes adultery and pornography. It includes homosexuality. It includes lusting with our eyes and our imaginations.

And if we're honest, these things affect the church as well. Too often we hear of yet another prominent pastor or Christian leader who has fallen, due to sexual immorality. But as sad and grievous as these instances are, they are expressions of God's grace. They remind us that Jesus is purifying His Church. He wanted a pure church back then, and He wants a pure church today.

And not just for the leaders, but for the whole church. Jesus includes in His rebuke those in the church who were "tolerating" Jezebel and her promoting of sexual immorality. Why were they tolerating her? Afraid of confrontation. Afraid of being rejected. Or afraid their own sexual sin would be exposed.

To be a purified church starts with being a purified person. So as we ask ourselves, “What should we tolerate in a church?”, we should first ask, “What am I tolerating in my own life?” Am I excusing and minimizing and hiding my sin, or am I repenting of my sin? Am I connected to this community of believers, inviting accountability from others? Do I see God’s grace, not only as mercy when I sin, but also as the power to resist sin, and to grow in sanctification?

A purified church starts with living a purified life. And when we fail, we repent. We find forgiveness in the shed blood of Christ. To repent of our sin and turn to Christ ensures forgiveness. Refusing to repent ensures judgment. And that’s the third aspect of Christ the Lord reveals...

III. Jesus will Judge

Concerning the false prophetess Jezebel, Jesus says in v. 21...

[21] I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. [22] Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed...

Notice the amazing depth of the grace and the patience of God. Jesus is not hasty with His judgments. He actually gave this false prophetess time to repent, but she did not. And because of that, she will receive the consequence of her sin – beginning in this life. Jesus said He will turn her bed of adultery into a bed of judgment and sickness. And not just her. (The rest of v. 22)...

[22b] ...and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, [23] and I will strike her children dead.

Jesus identifies two other groups in danger of judgment – “those who commit adultery with her”, and the “children” of Jezebel. The first group are those in the church who have been trying to have it both ways – those who want to claim the name of Christ, but who also want to embrace their sin. They are “committing adultery” with Jezebel – cheating on God by worshipping other things.

And those called Jezebel’s “children”, are likely those who not only are living double lives, but who are encouraging others to do the same – those who are helping promote her false teaching in the church, and therefore

multiply her offspring. It's one thing to live in sin. It's another thing to actively encourage others to do the same, to lead others astray.

Jesus says unless they repent, they will receive the same judgment as the Jezebel leading them. And then Jesus tells them why. (The rest of v. 23...)

[23b] ...And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

Jesus is bringing this judgment so that those who call themselves Christ-followers will know...that He knows. He sees and knows every thought. He knows every area of our hearts. When we repent, Jesus gives us grace and forgiveness. But when we refuse to repent, and we keep dabbling in what we know to be wrong, judgment awaits.

This shows us how seriously Jesus takes idolatry and sexual immorality in His Church. It should cause us to pause and ask of our own hearts, our own lives, "Where am I playing with fire? Am I pursuing and worshiping something (like money or man-pleasing) instead of worshiping Christ? Am I dabbling in hidden sin and sexual immorality, in pornography, in lust, in the things I watch on Netflix, in the things I am entertained by, in the things I think about?"

"David defeated Goliath but he lost to Bathsheba. Our real giants are the sinful desires we haven't killed yet." (Anonymous)

Jesus is calling for His church to be purified. He's purifying this church. How? By starting with me and starting with you. Jesus has already washed us in His blood and forgiven us by His grace. But that's not just saving grace, but also in his sanctifying grace - to live in the power of the Spirit, to hate sin and love God, to grow in Christ, in godliness and purity.

And for those who are growing, who deeply desire to honor Jesus with your lives, who want to be free from sin and live for Christ, Jesus sees you, and He knows your heart, and He draws near with His love and encouragement. In the midst of the warning for Jezebel and her crew, Jesus also addresses the faithful again, and He tells them in v. 24...

[24] But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. [25] Only hold fast what you have until I come.

Jezebel and her followers were promoting their false doctrine as “deep things of God”, as if they had some special word or new revelation from the Lord that was above scripture. Yes, they were teaching deep things, but Jesus calls them “deep things of Satan”.

But for those who are resisting Jezebel and her false teaching, Jesus tells them He is not going to give them additional commands. Just keep being faithful. Hold fast to the gospel already given to you – until Christ returns.

In our response to our culture and our temptations, we have two extremes – legalism and license. License says, “Do what you want, Jesus loves you anyway. You don’t have to resist sin, you don’t have to live holy lives.” This is what this Jezebel was teaching in Thyatira.

The other extreme is legalism, to add to the requirements of Scripture, to make convictions into commands, to live isolated lives from the world in such a way that we are no longer a light in the darkness. And to place burdens on ourselves and others that Scripture does not.

So Jesus encourages the faithful by saying he won’t add to their burden. He doesn’t want them to don’t overreact and become legalistic. In our desire to avoid what Scripture forbids, we must not go so far that we prohibit what Scripture allows, nor condemn others where the Bible is silent.

Let this be a warning and an encouragement for us. A warning against license or legalism, and an encouragement that the commands of Scripture are sufficient and they are good. God does not condemn those who are His, but He corrects us. He disciplines us for our good. He loves us and is patient with us. When we sin, we don’t run away from Christ, but we run to Him, knowing He is quick to forgive and gives grace to the humble.

Jesus told His disciples that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. That doesn’t mean life is always easy. Or resisting sin is always easy. But it means that everything Christ requires of us to live holy lives, He has already given us the grace we need – by giving us His word to guide us, the Holy Spirit to empower us, and the Church to encourage us. Jesus sees, Jesus purifies, Jesus will judge. And now, the Lord ends His letter by reminding them...

IV. Jesus Will Reward

[26] The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, [27] and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

This promise is found all through the NT, the promise for those who follow Christ in this life, we will rule with Christ in the next life. I don't know exactly what this will look like, but the promise is clear: the authority that Jesus walks in will also be given, in some measure, to His Church.

This had to be especially meaningful to the saints of Thyatira, considering how they were constantly struggling with the authorities over them on their job, the bosses that ruled over them and expected them to bow to idols. Jesus reminds the faithful, "the one who keeps my works until the end" that Christian will no longer be under an ungodly authority – they will be the ones in authority, reigning with their Savior.

Then Jesus promises another reward...

[28] And I will give him the morning star.

We are not sure exactly what this means. But we have a hint later in Revelation chapter 22, when Jesus says "*I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.*" (Rev. 22:16)

Jesus is saying to the faithful, I will not only give to you authority to rule, but I will give you...Myself. Just as stars were used to guide travelers on their way, as the Morning Star, Jesus will be our guide in all truth, and will keep us heading the right direction.

Hear this church: The greatest reward Jesus gives us is Himself. He is the gift. He is the reward. To know Christ and to be known by Him. He is ours and we are His, united forever with the Savior.

-In all my sorrows, Jesus is better.

-In all my victories, Jesus is better.

-In all my pursuits and preoccupations, in my strengths and in my struggles, in life and in death, may I live in the beautiful truth that Jesus is better!

When we realize that, Church, we will no longer see our struggle against sin as simply the things we need to resist. Instead, we will see the true joy and pleasure in Christ as greater than anything else.

And with that in mind, Jesus ends this letter the way He ends all of them...
[29] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

There are many voices in this world vying for your attention, many different philosophies and temptations and beliefs competing for your allegiance.

The siren song of Jezebel whispers, "If it feels good, do it." How do we resist? By hearing and obeying what the Spirit is saying to the churches. By listening to and living by the Word of God, and not the whims of the world.

The Bible says,

-“Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). Jesus wants His Church to not only listen to His word and the live it as well.

-To be “doers of the word and not hearers only” (James 1:22)

-For “His commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world... And who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:3–5).

And how do we know that for sure?

“Because he that began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

May we see Christ as all-satisfying, so our hearts won't be tempted to stray to other affections.

May we embrace His sanctifying work in us, growing in the holiness of Christ, and the joy of the Spirit.

And in it all, may Jesus continue to purify His Bride until we are made perfect in His presence.

(Let's pray)