

“To the Church in Thyatira”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 6

Texts: Revelation 2:18-29; I Kings 16:29-33

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Jesus commends the Ephesians for persevering in sound doctrine. But Jesus also rebukes the Ephesian church for losing their first love—their love for the brethren. The church in Thyatira has the opposite problem. Indeed, Jesus commends the congregation in Thyatira because of their love for their brethren—so much so, says Jesus, that their love for their fellow Christians has actually increased over time. But Jesus also rebukes this church for tolerating false teaching within their midst. The Christians of Thyatira are loving, but they are not discerning.

As we continue with our series on the Book of Revelation, we come to the fourth in a series of seven letters addressed by Jesus Christ to the churches of Asia Minor—Christ’s letter to the church in Thyatira. Recall that these seven letters are found in a larger vision which began in Revelation 1:12 with a description of the resurrected Lord who walks among the seven golden lampstands which are symbolic of Christ’s presence with his church. It is Jesus Christ, the Almighty and Lord of life, who stands in the midst of his churches, commending them for being faithful, encouraging them in the midst of persecution, and rebuking them for failing to do as they ought to do.

As we have seen, there are a number of reoccurring themes in these seven letters. In his opening comments to each of his churches, Jesus addresses the angels of these congregations as well as referring back to John’s vision which opens the chapter. Next, Jesus specifically addresses the circumstances facing each of these congregations, saying “I know . . .” your situation, before describing what each church was enduring in some detail. Then our Lord promises covenantal blessing for obedience and faithfulness to his word, while also threatening curses for continued disobedience. Each of these seven letters concludes with the promise of Christ’s blessing as well as the familiar exhortation, “*he who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

This exhortation from our Lord is important because while Jesus is speaking to each of these congregations in the specific cities named in western Asia Minor near the end of the first century, Jesus is also speaking to his entire church throughout the course of this present evil age. Throughout the Book of Revelation seven is a number which symbolizes perfection or completeness. There are seven letters to seven churches because the issues facing these churches are issues which will confront Christ’s church until he comes again with great power and glory at the end of the age.

The letter to the church in Thyatira is the longest of these seven letters, and perhaps the most difficult to interpret.

As we have seen with each of these letters, it is essential for us to understand something about the historical context of this particular church in order to correctly interpret our Lord’s letter to this congregation. The city of Thyatira is quite unlike the earlier cities we have seen—Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum. These were all large cities and important centers of commerce. Thyatira was not. All of three of the former cities were dominated by various forms of paganism. The Christians of Ephesus lived in the shadow of the temple of Diana and were immersed in a culture which was dominated by the worship of Diana. The cities of Smyrna and Pergamum were not only filled with pagan temples of every

sort, but were also centers of emperor worship. Christians who lived in these two cities found themselves facing death and imprisonment at the hands of the beast—that is, the Satanically empowered Roman government—which attempted to force Christians to confess that “Caesar is Lord” at the point of a sword. Unless Christians in these cities were willing to confess that Caesar was Lord—which is to take the mark of the beast—they were not allowed to buy and sell or to participate in the commercial and cultural life of the city. If you were a Christian living in Smyrna and Pergamum, it truly cost you something to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and that Caesar is not.

In addition to living under such difficult circumstances because of the paganism which was rampant in these cities, Christians in these cities faced another problem. They were slandered by certain Jews who were secularized to the point that while they continued to worship YHWH, they also were willing to confess the divinity of Caesar in order to conduct their business and participate in the cultural affairs of the city. As a result of all of this persecution and slander, the Christians in Smyrna were forced to live in abject poverty. Many were arrested and imprisoned. And even though Satan persecuted them to the point of death, Jesus promises to give them the crown of life.

The Christians in Pergamum likewise refused to abandon Jesus Christ and confess the divinity of Caesar. One Christian who lived in Pergamum, a certain Antipas, had already been put to death. But the Christians in Pergamum also faced another, more subtle enemy in addition to the persecution of the Beast. Members of the Pergamum church were taken in by false teachers, known as the Nicolaitans, who followed the example of the secularized Jews and had somehow managed to seduce a number of Christians into thinking that they could confess Jesus as Lord and then participate in various pagan practices which were so prevalent throughout the city—a city which by the way, was so filled with pagan influences that Jesus identifies Pergamum as that place where Satan lives and has established his throne.

For tolerating these Nicolaitans in their midst, the Pergamum church is rebuked by Jesus, who threatens to come to them in judgment using his two-edged sword of truth. For all those who overcome, Christ promises them the hidden manna—which is the promise of the gospel signed and sealed in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper—as well as a white stone which links believers to Jesus Christ who rides the white horse of judgment. To possess the white stone with one’s hidden name is to be known by Christ and to receive eternal life from him who judges all men.

But the situation in Thyatira is somewhat different from that facing Christians elsewhere. Now known as Akhisar, Thyatira was a very insignificant place when compared with the wealth and status of other three cities we have just mentioned. As one writer puts it, “the longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable of the cities.”¹ Thyatira was located on the Hermus River in a broad valley through which the military forces of the ancient world’s great empires often passed on their way to more strategic points elsewhere. Lying on the road between Pergamum and Sardis, and near another road leading to Smyrna, Thyatira was occupied countless times by one army, only to be recaptured by their opponents. Thyatira was not known for its culture or wealth, but instead for its almost accidental role in military history. Thyatira is like Gettysburg or Panmujom, cities which are famous for battles fought in them even while the cities themselves had no real strategic significance.

With a growing local economy, Thyatira was home to many local industries including bakers, painters,

¹ Cited in Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 79.

tanners, potters, coppersmiths, along with all of the trade guilds which formed to support these industries. To belong to one of these particular trades also meant belonging to the appropriate guild associated with that trade. Much like a modern labor union, a baker didn't bake, and a painter didn't paint, a shoemaker didn't make shoes, unless they belonged to the local guild. But belonging to one of these guilds, often times meant participating in pagan feasts, various temple rituals including prostitution, and fertility rites.

Therefore, the problem facing Christians in Thyatira is very difficult. While they were not being arrested and persecuted by the state they faced another subtle yet powerful form of pressure. If you were a Christian and happened to a coppersmith, in order to get work you had to join the local coppersmith guild. But the coppersmith guild may have identified itself with a pagan deity in order to invoke that deities' blessing upon the local coppersmith industry. Guild meetings were probably held in the temples devoted to that deity. Guild members may have been encouraged to participate in all kinds of ungodly behavior to honor the pagan deity to whom the guild was devoted. And there were people within this church who saw nothing wrong with Christians participating in such activities.

One of the more prominent industries in Thyatira was the production and dying of fabric.² Recall that Lydia, who came to faith in Christ in the city of Philippi was a "seller of purples," and lived for a time in Thyatira. The city was also an important center of the manufacture of bronze, which is made from copper and tin, explaining certain features of John's description of the risen Christ, soon to follow. Although the city of Thyatira was insignificant in many ways, the church there was not. What Jesus says to the Christians in Thyatira, he also says to us. The same temptation to make peace with paganism that these Christians faced, is same temptation Christians elsewhere face.

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With historical background in mind, let us now turn to Revelation 2:18-29. Our Lord's letter to Thyatira begins with the now very familiar address in verse 18: "*To the angel of the church in Thyatira write.*" As has been the pattern throughout these letters, Jesus' first words to the church refer back to John's original vision of the resurrected Christ which opened the chapter. "*These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*" But why the reference to our Lord's eyes of blazing fire and to his feet of burnished bronze?

The most obvious reason to refer to the appearance of our Lord's feet as though they were bronze is probably the presence of a thriving bronze industry in the city. The Greek word for bronze used here is unique to the New Testament—it appears no where else in Greek literature. It may very well be that John uses a local word which refers to the specific type of bronze made in Thyatira. Those who gazed into a bronze smelter and saw the molten metal inside may understand a great deal about the glory of the risen Christ who is the Son of God.³ The image points us to Christ's transcendent glory and purifying power.

While our Lord's words here echo Psalm 2 and Daniel 7, there is also another important echo here from the Old Testament. When we add the image of a furnace with molten metal to the image of our Lord's eyes like blazing fire, there is a strong allusion to Daniel 3, when Daniel tells us of one who looked like a

² Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 79.

³ See the discussion in Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb (79) and Poythress, The Returning King, 88-89.

“son of the gods” walking in the blazing furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo. Such a connection should remind the Thyatirans that even as Jesus preserved these three young Hebrew men in the midst of a Babylonian furnace, so too, he will preserve the Thyatirans in the midst of their troubles as well.⁴ Jesus is a Savior who knows full well how to preserve his people when they suffer persecution at the hands of God’s enemies.

Once again, Jesus speaks directly to the situation facing this congregation, this time commending this congregation for a number of good things going on in their midst. *“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.”* Here is a church doing the very things the Ephesian church is not. Their deeds of love are self-evident and through these deeds they manifest their great faith in the son of God. In fact, over time, their works of mercy and charity for the brethren have actually grown. Unlike the Ephesians who needed to do those things they did at the beginning, the Christians in Thyatira were actually doing more now than they did at first. They were growing in their love for each other. And for this, Jesus commends them. But a rebuke will now follow. As Dennis Johnson so aptly states, it were as though Jesus were saying to this church, *“I love your love, but hate your tolerance.”*⁵

According to verse 20, Jesus says: *“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.”* As was the case in the previous letter to the church in Pergamum, Jesus refers to an incident in the Old Testament to inform this church about the precise nature of their sins. Jezebel, as you may know, was the princess of Sidon and the wife of Ahab. As we saw in our Old Testament lesson, Jezebel was married to Ahab during that time the people of Israel were seduced into the worship of Baal. As we read in 1 Kings 16:29-33, *“In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.”*

Although Jezebel is barely mentioned in 1 Kings—Ahab receiving all the blame—we read in 2 Kings 9 that Jezebel was the source of the “witchcraft and idolatry” then present in Ahab’s family. Her fate is spelled out in the balance of 2 Kings 9. Jezebel was killed when her servants threw her down from a window and her body was eaten by dogs. Therefore, the story of Jezebel is symbolic of what someone, apparently, a woman, was actually teaching in the Thyatiran congregation. This woman was leading Christ’s people into the arms of the harlot, even as the original Jezebel deceived Israel into the worship of Baal.

In this case, the Jezebel of Thyatira fancied herself as a prophetess of sorts—claiming to reveal the secret things of God through means of predictive prophecy. Furthermore, this woman was actively encouraging the Thyatirans to participate in paganism, probably that associated with the local trade guilds. These pagan practices once again involved sexual immorality and eating meat sacrificed to idols, which is

⁴ Beale, Revelation, 259.

⁵ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 80.

probably a reference to eating certain foods within the context of pagan feasts. As we have seen, if Satan cannot conquer Christ's church through the sheer power of the Beast, he will attempt to do so through the introduction of destructive false teaching, depicted throughout Revelation as seduction by the harlot, whose end is depicted in Revelation 18 when Babylon the Great is destroyed.

But even the midst of Jezebel's grievous sin, we still see God's graciousness on display. According to verse 21, Jesus says "*I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.*" Through whatever means—perhaps the preaching of the word, perhaps through the leadership of the church—Jesus has warned this woman Jezebel about the consequences of her actions. But despite this display of God's kindness which should lead her to repentance, the Jezebel of Thyatira will not repent. She is still encouraging Christians to participate in paganism. And not only will Jezebel not repent, the Thyatiran church has not cast her out. Therefore, Christ warns this congregation in no uncertain terms that he will come to them in judgment.

In fact, in verse 22, Jesus himself declares, "*So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead.*" Not only does Jesus threaten to bring sickness and suffering upon this woman, he will also punish all those who commit spiritual adultery with her as well. And just as the original Jezebel was cast from her own window and killed, so too, Jesus threatens to bring death upon this woman and upon all those who continue to follow her now that they have been duly warned.

This threat of temporal punishment is not an isolated case in the New Testament. There are other such warnings. In Acts 5, we read of how God struck Ananias and his wife Sapphira dead, because they lied to the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 11, we are warned of God's judgment upon all those who do not discern Christ's body in the Lord's Supper. And here too, we see the threat of temporal punishment for disobedient Christians who commit spiritual adultery. God does not do this because he is cruel or because he is a tyrant. He does it to protect the purity and sanctity of his church. Jesus himself says to the Thyatirans: *Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.* God will do what it takes to prepare a spotless and radiant bride for his son. He will protect the church by whatever means he deems appropriate.

There is yet another theological problem mentioned in this church stemming from Jezebel's influence. In verse 24 Jesus says, "*Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets.*" With these words Jesus acknowledges that there are faithful people in this church who have not listened to this woman and because they have not listened to her have not learned Satan's deep secrets. This reference to the so-called "deep secrets of Satan" is probably a metaphor playing upon the familiar phrase the "deep things of God," which this Jezebel probably claimed to be revealing to the Thyatirans through her self-proclaimed prophetic office. Perhaps she was practicing a kind of proto-gnosticism and was revealing "secret knowledge" to people through her prophecies. But in actuality she was not revealing the deep things of God—she was revealing the deep things of Satan. She is leading people astray, hence John's reference to the Satan's so-called deep secrets.⁶ But to those who have not been taken in by this woman's deception, Jesus says: "*I will not impose any other burden on you. Only hold on to what you have until I come.*" Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. All he now asks of his faithful is to hold on to the gospel until he comes at the end of the age.

⁶ See the helpful discussion of this in Beale, Revelation, 265-266.

As in each of these letters, Jesus ends this letter with a final word of exhortation: “*To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father.*” To those who persevere in the faith, they are now promised that Christ himself will share with them his messianic authority. Just as Jesus rules over the nations, so too, all those who are his will reign with him. To those Christians who lived in this small backwater town, and who may have felt powerless in the face of such deeply entrenched paganism, they should be greatly encouraged with the promise that they will receive one of the greatest privileges of all—ruling with Christ.

But not only will these Christians rule with Jesus, he gives them something much better. “*I will also give him the morning star.*” Recall that in a vision recorded in Numbers 24:17, Balaam saw a star emerging from Jacob, one who would ride forth from Israel and crush the Moabites. This star pointed ahead to a warrior-king, who will identify himself later in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 22:16, Jesus says: “*I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.*” Therefore, Jesus not only promises this struggling church that they will reign with him, but that they will be given the greatest treasure of all, himself.⁷

Once again the application for us is very straightforward. Jesus Christ warns us not to tolerate people in our midst who claim to reveal secret things, but who then attempt to lead us into making unholy compromises with the paganism around us. As followers of Jesus Christ we can never make peace with paganism, nor with the teaching of non-Christian religions, whether it be to get a job or because of a desire to participate in cultural and civic activities.

But while we must always be willing to make sacrifices in such situations, and while we must be willing to receive the scorn of men for being followers of Christ, let us never forget what Jesus himself promises us. Since he alone possesses all authority, not only will he crush his enemies and all those who hate him and persecute his church, but Jesus, the morning star, gives us nothing less than himself through his word and through his sacraments.

Therefore, we need no secret knowledge or prophecies. We need not make peace with paganism. With Jesus Christ in our midst through word and sacrament we have everything that we need. For he is our morning star.

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

⁷ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 82.