
SERMON NOTES

Revelation #10. Revelation 2:18-29

Jesus has some very harsh words for those who claim to be Christians, yet do not repent. He is judgmental toward Christians who are tolerant of such people. But He offers strength to those who hold on to Him, and the promise of His own fully satisfying Eternal Presence as compensation for the things we lose in this life by following Him.

There were two small children who had been giving their mother quite a bit of trouble one day. After numerous battles, accidents and minor emergencies, bed-time arrived at last. The woman finally got them safely installed in their beds (which were in the same room) and sat down to few moments of time for herself. She decided to use the time to “baby” herself, so she donned her old raggedy bathrobe, applied a facial cosmetic mask, and sat down to do her nails. Alas, it was not to be. The children were causing a rumpus in their bedroom. She raced into the room, her hair up in towel, the facial mask still in place, and yelled and screamed and ordered them to be quiet. Shocked, they obeyed, and said they were sorry. As she was leaving the room, the mother heard the younger one whisper to the older, “who was that?”

It may be that this was how the church of Thyatira felt when they got their message from Jesus. Jesus revealed himself to them through what may have been a shocking, unfamiliar image. This is what he “looked like”:

“The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire and His feet are like burnished bronze (v.18)”

This is the only time that Jesus identifies himself as the “Son of God,” and I think there is no mistake in it. Jesus wants there to be no “ifs” “ands” or “buts” about his authority in Thyatira. His Word is absolute. Not only does he come to them in authority, but he comes in anger. The “eyes like a flame of fire” seem to denote that Jesus is not pleased with what has been happening here. It might be said that his eyes are flashing in anger. And finally, the feet like burnished bronze seem to indicate judgment. He is about to trample under his feet those who oppose him.

Immediately after this terrifying picture of Jesus, He begins, as usual, by praising the Christians at Thyatira for some things: love, faith, service and perseverance. Not only that, but He tells them that He knows that they are doing more now that they were at the beginning – in other words they are growing in love and good deeds. Why then, is Jesus revealing Himself as coming in judgement and anger?

Thyatira was not an important city, like Ephesus, Smyrna or Pergamum. It was not a center of either emperor worship, or pagan religion, although both practices were no doubt common there. Instead, the city was basically a “blue-collar” area, an ancient Pittsburgh or Peoria. Several trade and craftsman guilds had their headquarters in Thyatira, and the city apparently was a center for traded goods. It would be safe to assume that many of the people there belonged to a craftsman guild or some sort of “trade association.” In fact, it would have been difficult to participate in trade or industry without membership in the appropriate guild. In some ways, these guilds might be similar to the labor unions at the height of their power during the middle of the 20th century. If you want a job, you belong to the guild. Period.

The problem, however, was this. These trade guilds regularly held “common meals” which were probably dedicated to some pagan god or other. Many of the Christians felt that they had to participate in these feasts or risk losing their livelihood. We can imagine the sorts of rationalization that would be employed. Idols and pagan deities are not real gods, some would argue, so the Christian should be able to attend without compromising his commitment to the one true God. There was an additional complication, however, in that many of these feasts often ended in drunkenness and people having sex indiscriminately. There was a lot at stake in Thyatira, since non-participation in these immoral idol-feasts could result in the loss of a way to make a living. I have to say that I myself as a pastor would have difficulty firmly telling people that they should take action that would probably result in a financial crisis for them. I don’t imagine it was any easier for the church leaders in Thyatira.

In addition to this pressure from the culture, there was also a problem *within* the Christian community. There was a well-known woman there who taught that it was OK for Christians to participate in idol worship and sexual immorality. Apparently, she even encouraged it. She claimed to be a “Prophetess,” to speak for God. Jesus, however, calls her “Jezebel.” I highly doubt that Jezebel was her actual name. It wasn’t a common name in that area in those days. Instead, I think Jesus is calling her “Jezebel” to show what he thinks of her. In the Old Testament “Jezebel” was the name of the wife of King Ahab of Israel. She was very instrumental in leading the kingdom of Israel away from God, and toward the worship of idols, and she was a thoroughly evil woman. So the name “Jezebel” for the prophetess of Thyatira is meant to reveal her true character, not her actual name. Her character is evil, and her teachings are leading God’s people away from Him, and into destruction. This “prophetess” does not speak for God at all.

I want to make something very clear here. The problem is not simply that a few Christians here and there are falling to temptation and sinning occasionally. These are people who are pursuing a lifestyle of ongoing sin, and teaching others to do the same.

How could this happen? How can a church be growing in faith, perseverance, service and love, accomplishing greater things for the kingdom of God, and yet allow such false teaching and immoral practice? Apparently they knew at some level that her teachings were false – why did they let her continue?

It appears that there were two groups of people within the Church at Thyatira. One group embraced the teaching (promoted by the self-styled “Prophetess”) that Christians could fully participate in idol worship and sexual immorality. They not only embraced the teaching, but also the actual lifestyle. The second group apparently did not agree with these teachings, nor did they participate, but they *tolerated* the Christians who did such things, and also those who taught such things. They didn’t rebuke “Jezebel” or her followers.

Tolerance, of course is highly prized in our society today, and I think we have probably already heard the kinds of things that the Thyatirans might have said to persuade themselves not to do anything about “Jezebel.” Have you heard any of these before?

“Oh, I’m not judgmental. ‘Judge not that you be not judged.’”

“We’d better take the log out of our own eyes before we try to remove the splinter from hers.”

“Who’s to say that she *isn’t* a prophetess? I don’t have an exclusive connection to God.”

“If we say she’s wrong, and people can’t do that, then a lot of people might lose their jobs! We can’t be responsible for that!”

“If we say this is wrong, we might lose some members of the church who really like her and her teachings.”

“I think maybe she’s starting to come around a bit. Let’s just keep praying for her and hope she sees the light.”

Do these sound familiar? You see, the Christians at Thyatira knew that what she did was wrong, but they let her keep doing it. They were timid – they didn’t want to rock the boat. They didn’t want to cause trouble or sound judgmental.

Jesus, however, has no trouble sounding judgmental. Lest anyone wonder, he declares that this “Jezebel” had been given the opportunity to repent, and she spurned it. Therefore, she is going to be punished, both only eternally, and also physically, right now, along with her followers. It is entirely possible, considering the nature of their sins, that the Lord would allow them to contract syphilis or some other STD, which in those days, before antibiotics could be painful and deadly. In any case the language suggests a connection between the “bed of adultery” and the “bed of sickness.”

In addition, he says “I will kill her children with pestilence.” I do not think this means her actual, physical children, if she had any. From the context, it is almost certain that when he says “her children,” Jesus means her *followers*. There will be severe judgment not only on “Jezebel” but also everyone who participates with her. The purpose for the judgment is to show all believers in Asia that while Jezebel is a false prophetess Jesus is the true son of God, and he deals with truth – whatever the outward appearance may be.

Again, let’s make this clear. This isn’t about people who are trying to follow Jesus, but occasionally fail, and fall into sin. This is about *ongoing lifestyles of sin*, and about *endorsing* such lifestyles.

Let’s bring into real life in the 21st century right now. As I mentioned last time, we seldom worship statues anymore. But when we center our lives around anything other than God himself, we are engaged in idolatry. If our deepest hopes, comforts or fears are found any place outside of the presence of God, we are idol-worshippers. In addition, no matter what our culture says, sexual immorality is a big deal to God. It is not an option for those who claim to be Christians. Now, I don’t mean that if you have ever sinned sexually you are going to hell. The forgiveness we have in Jesus is real, and powerful, and it overcomes **all** sins. But it is not an option to claim to be Christian while we continue in a long-term pattern of sinning without repentance – sexually, or otherwise. This isn’t *me* talking: it is unquestionably what the Bible teaches.

The church at Thyatira sounds haunting familiar to me. Many who call themselves Christians today are willing to serve others and show love to the world, and even to persevere in doing those things. But they are not willing to confront sin. They are not willing to sound judgmental, and in fact, they get angry at other Christians who do try to confront people who persistently live a sinful lifestyle. Our passage today makes it clear what Jesus thinks of Christians who tolerate sinful lifestyles in the church. It isn’t enough simply to “love and serve.” If people claim to follow Jesus, a persistently sinful lifestyle is not an option. Tolerating those who call themselves Christians while they live in unrepentant sin is also not an option. Good works and serving others is not enough if we tolerate sin in this way.

Now, when I say that Jesus does not tolerate these things, and that we should not either, I am not talking about any kind of violence, anger or oppression. We do not have permission from Jesus to hurt others. But we must not call "Christian" what Jesus calls sinful. Paul explains this very well in his letter to the Corinthians:

⁹I wrote to you in a letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. ¹⁰I did not mean the immoral people of this world or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters; otherwise you would have to leave the world. ¹¹But now I am writing you not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer who is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or verbally abusive, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person. ¹²For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Don't you judge those who are inside? ¹³But God judges outsiders. **Put away the evil person from among yourselves.** (1Cor 5:9-13, HCSB)

Let's also be clear about this. This isn't my opinion. This is what the Lord Himself says to His church. Do not accept as a Christian someone who persistently sins without repentance. In our passage today, Jesus shows his anger at those who say otherwise.

Now, in the case of Thyatira, Jesus simply tells the Church to take a stand. He makes two promises to those who do so, who hold fast until He returns:

a) Authority over the nations. I believe that this promise is given to drive home the main point. Are you afraid of being judgmental toward fellow Christians? Don't you know that in the future you will judge even more? Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 6:2-3

²Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! (1Cor 6:2-3, ESV2011)

By "saints" Paul simply means "Christians." Peter says something similar:

¹⁷For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? (1Pet 4:17, HCSB)

This promise is a reminder that we *do* have the authority to call sin "sin" and to speak out against wrongdoing. It is not wrong to do so. If we faithfully do it now, he is saying, our authority will continue in greater measure after we are with him.

b) Jesus also promises "The morning star."

This is a bit surprising. However, Jesus Himself is called the "morning star" in Revelation 22:16. I think this is the promise that those who repent and persist in faith will receive the eternal glory and satisfaction of the full presence of Jesus Himself. In the New Heavens and New Earth, the presence of Jesus will be enough for all of our needs. He will fill us with eternal joy.

I think this is an important promise for people who stand to lose finances or relationships because of their faith in Jesus. I mentioned this last time, but it is a real possibility that Christians may need to make hard choices in order to continue to follow Jesus. We may need to stay out of certain professions that require us to teach others that immorality is good and normal. We may need to forgo sending children to universities that are actively undermining their faith. We may have to avoid financially lucrative opportunities that put us in morally compromising situations. When we have to do these things, Jesus promises the fullness of his own presence as compensation. He is all sufficient, and nothing we lose in this life compares to the joy and glory and grace of the Morning Star in our lives.