

# Letters to the Seven Churches: Thyatira

REVELATION 2:18-29

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**\*\*COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE\*\***

It is good to see you this morning! I hope you have the elements for the Lord's Supper with you. John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning. And then, Caleb will be leading us in "To Christ Be Loyal and Be True" (#707).

We are starting, this morning, with a summary of God's plan for our salvation. This is repetition for most of us, but we make sure to do this every time we get together, because we don't know whether this is the first, the last, or the only time for somebody to be with us. And even if we've heard the good news many times, we need the reminder – not only for our own benefit, but as a reminder that we need to be telling others. God sent his only Son to die on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. And in response, once we believe that good news, we turn to God with a change of heart concerning sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism.

And once again, we are starting today with an example. This one comes from Rocco Pierce, a friend of mine who has been preaching in the South Pacific, in Fiji, ever since we graduated from Freed-Hardeman together, many years ago. About a week ago, he posted that a Christian couple in that area, Joeli and Litia, have taken in several young men to mentor. And then he posted a video of Bill, one of those young men, putting on Christ in baptism at Buca. He says that the angels in heaven are rejoicing! And again, we are sharing this by way of encouragement: What Bill has done this week, you can do this morning! If you would like to learn more, please give us a call or send a message. The church number is 608-224-0274.

This morning, we continue our series of lessons on Jesus' messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Back in December, we learned that the book of Revelation is written by the apostle John, from a Roman prison colony on the island of Patmos, most likely in the mid-90's AD. John writes to encourage the church as they endure some intense persecution, and the message is: In the end, God wins, so hang in there! We started, then, by introducing Jesus. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is revealed for who he really is. And then we moved into the letters in Chapter 2, and we learned that we are basically reading other churches' mail, and that's okay! This book was designed to be shared.

The first message was written to the church in EPHESUS. And Jesus' evaluation was that they were really good at standing for the truth and weeding out false teachers, but they had left their first love. So, Jesus calls on them to repent and return and to do the things that they did at the beginning.

The second message was sent to the church in SMYRNA. They had been pressured and slandered, but they are not condemned for anything; instead, Jesus encourages them to ***"be faithful until death,"*** and he would give them the crown of life – nothing but encouragement in that message.

Last week, we looked at the message to PERGAMUM. These people had faithfully held onto the Lord's name (going back to the days of Antipas, the Lord's faithful witness who gave up his life for the faith); however, some of the Christians in Pergamum were holding to the teaching of Balaam and to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, and the Lord's message was that these people need to repent, or else he would come and make war against them with the sword of his mouth.

**I. Today, we move to the next message, and this one is intended for the church in THYATIRA.**

By way of review, before we get to the text itself, I just want to give the reminder that we are using the same basic outline for all of these lessons. We're looking at the CITY itself and any background information we might have, then we'll look at how JESUS describes himself, we'll look at the POSITIVE, then the NEGATIVE, followed by any COMMANDS that are given, and then ending with a CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

But we start with the city, and it seems to me that Thyatira is the smallest and the least significant city we've seen up to this point. And yet, Thyatira gets the longest of the seven messages. We don't know too much about Thyatira. We have a few ruins. We know it was a rather small city. It was located in a valley, along a trade route. But we do know that it was intended to be something of a speedbump for any invaders from the east who might have been interested in attacking Pergamum, the capital city. As I understand it, the idea was that being in a valley, Thyatira couldn't really be defended too well, but if a foreign army invaded, Thyatira would slow them down just long enough for somebody to go tell Pergamum to get ready (Thyatira being roughly 40 miles southeast of Pergamum). Archaeologists tell us that Thyatira, then, was destroyed and rebuilt, destroyed and rebuilt, over and over again. And there wasn't really a reason for this, other than as a buffer between invading armies and Pergamum. The name Thyatira means "unceasing sacrifice," and some think that it goes back to Thyatira's role as an "unceasing sacrifice." It was something of a military town, and the name was perhaps given as being somewhat descriptive of their mission. Today, we think about names like "Operation Enduring Freedom" or "Desert Storm." Thyatira was an "unceasing sacrifice."

Beyond this, we also know that Thyatira was known as being a producer of purple dye – coming from the snot of a mollusk (at least that's how I would describe it). It was labor intensive, and a pound of purple cloth was literally worth its weight in gold. This industry helped Thyatira's reputation for being a city of trade. Last week, we learned about the guilds (somewhat similar to a trade union). Thyatira had guilds for just about everything. We have an inscription listing guilds for wool-workers, leather-workers, tanners, weavers, tent-makers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, and bronze-smiths. It was very much a blue-collar town, we might say. I would compare it to Janesville. They made stuff in Thyatira. We think of Lydia, the first convert in Europe, baptized by Paul in Acts 16. Lydia was ***"a seller of purple fabric,"*** from Thyatira. It's possible, then, that Lydia brought the gospel back home after being baptized herself in Philippi.

So, with this as background, let's look together at the message. It's found in Revelation 2:18-29, but since it's a bit longer than the others, I want us to take it one section at a time so it fits on the screen a bit better.

**II. We start with verse 18 as we notice how JESUS DESCRIBES HIMSELF in this message.**

This is what John writes in verse 18, ***“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this.”*** These are his credentials, and we notice, first of all, how Jesus describes himself as ***“the Son of God.”*** As I understand it, this is the only time this title is used in Revelation. He does this, perhaps, because there was a temple to Apollo in Thyatira, Apollo being considered the son of Zeus. Unlike Apollo, though, Jesus is the Son of the Living God. A good reminder.

We also notice how Jesus describes himself as having ***“eyes like a flame of fire”*** and ***“feet...like burnished bronze.”*** Like the others, this goes back to the description of Jesus in Revelation 1, but it also goes back to the book of Daniel. In Daniel 10:6, Jesus is described as having ***“eyes...like flaming torches”*** and having ***“arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze.”*** When the Christians in Thyatira read this for the first time, then, they would have thought back to the book of Daniel. They would have remembered how God saved and protected Daniel, as well as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. They would have remembered how these four young men stood up to the pressure to eat the king's food. They would have remembered the intense pressure to bow down to the huge statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. They would have remembered the fiery furnace. And speaking of Jesus being the ***“Son of God”*** in this letter, they would have remembered how the king looked in the fire and saw a fourth man who appeared to be ***“like a son of the gods.”*** They would have remembered Daniel's service to various kings. They would have remembered how the king made it illegal to pray. Where my sister lives, the governor has actually made it illegal to sing in church right now. What strange times we are living in! But when the Christians in Thyatira read this description of Jesus, they would have remembered Daniel's obedience to God in spite of the king's edict, and they would have remembered Daniel being thrown into the den of lions and coming out alive the next morning. They worship a God who has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze, the God of Daniel, a God who saves his people from oppressive governments. And so, whatever happens next in Thyatira: Remember Daniel! Remember GOD in the book of Daniel! He has eyes like a flame of fire – he sees everything we do and what we are going through. He has feet like burnished bronze – he has the power to conquer evil and to execute justice. He also has the power to see and to trample out corruption in his church. So, this is Jesus.

**III. As we move into verse 19, we have an amazing COMPLIMENT as Jesus says, ***“I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.”*****

***“I know your deeds,”*** I see what you are doing! The word we have translated here as ***“deeds”*** or ***“works”*** goes back to the word ERGON, and we might recognize it in the word “ergonomics.” Ergonomics is the science of design applied to the equipment we use at work – optimizing productivity while reducing fatigue and injury. The point is: Jesus knows their deeds. He knows the work they are doing as a congregation. He also knows their love, and faith, and service, and perseverance. And unlike the Christians in Ephesus who once were loving but had left their first love, the Christians in Thyatira are moving in the opposite direction; instead of leaving their first love, their love and their deeds are getting stronger. Their love is increasing. It's obviously much better to be getting better at something than to be getting worse at something. Some of you know that my wife was on the rifle team at her high school up in Alaska, but what you might not know is that she won the award for being the “most improved shooter.” When she first joined the team, she was bouncing shots off the floor into the target.

That right there is pretty impressive. But over time, she improved and worked her way up to the A-team, the top four shooters in a team of 36. I say this to emphasize that improvement is good.

And this is what's going on in Thyatira. This is not only an active congregation, but they are getting better. What an awesome compliment. We would love it if Jesus could say this about us here in Madison. We want to be increasing in love, and in faith, and in service, and in perseverance. But if we are not increasing in these areas, maybe we need to ask ourselves: What can we do to change that direction? How can we be getting better as a congregation in these areas? Even in a pandemic, what can we do to be more loving tomorrow than we are today? How can we serve each other more effectively this week than we did last week? Obviously, we can't do some things we've done in the past, but what CAN we do? How can we "be Jesus" to each other and to the world around us?

The compliment is: Jesus knows our deeds, and it seems he's pretty impressed by some people in Thyatira.

**IV. In our outline, we come to the CRITICISM (in verses 20-23) and the criticism here is rather severe.**

Jesus says,

***20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. 23 And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.***

This church is doing so much good, and yet they "tolerate" an evil woman. Based on verse 19, we might start thinking that this is a perfect congregation. And yet we know that there really is no such thing. The church is made up of imperfect people (people just like us), and their downfall in Thyatira is that they "tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet, and she teaches and leads [the Lord's] bond-servants astray." Our society values tolerance, doesn't it? If someone is intolerant, they must not have love. And if someone is tolerant, they must be full of love. That's the way many people around us seem to be thinking anyway. Jezebel, though, is a bad influence. And she's actively spreading false and dangerous information, all the while claiming to be speaking for God.

And I want us to notice here at the beginning that yes, Jesus is upset with Jezebel herself, but first, the Lord is upset with the church for tolerating this woman. This is the opposite of what we see at Ephesus. In Ephesus, they were good at weeding out false teachers, but they had left their first love; here, they seem to be growing in love, but they tolerate this evil woman who is wreaking havoc in the congregation. Once again, then, Jesus has to condemn a church for being too tolerant (just as he did with Pergamum).

As we come to the woman herself, we find that Jesus refers to her as "Jezebel." We doubt this is her actual name, but Jesus is probably using the reference as something of a description. Jezebel, of course, was a queen during the days of Elijah, back in 1 Kings. We are introduced to Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kings 16:29-31,

***29 Now Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. 30 Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. 31 It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him.***

Jezebel's husband, Ahab the king, was an evil man himself, and almost immediately, Jezebel and Ahab start steering the nation away from God. She makes it her personal mission to search out and kill the prophets, she replaces God's prophets with prophets of Baal. And before long, God's people are worshiping Baal. She took something evil and proclaimed that it was good. That right there is one way to determine whether a prophet is true or false. When somebody claiming to be a religious leader takes an abomination in the eyes of God and says it's a good thing, that's a sign! And for the purpose of this study: Ahab the king tolerated what his wife was doing! And this is what the church in Thyatira is doing. There's an evil woman in the church, claiming to speak for God when she isn't – she's saying, "God told me to tell you this," when God has not said anything to her, and these people are letting it happen.

It seems we have two main sins here: She's encouraging God's people to commit acts of sexual immorality, and she is also encouraging them to eat things that have been sacrificed to idols (she's encouraging them to participate in idol worship). We need to remember: God has spoken on these two issues, and God has said the opposite of what this woman is saying. God does NOT want us to commit acts of sexual immorality. God does NOT want us to participate in the worship of idols. And yet, like the serpent in Genesis 2, this woman is claiming to speak for God when she isn't.

In response, what I find amazing here is that the Lord seems to allow this (at least for a time). He doesn't strike her dead right away, but (in verse 21) he allows time for repentance, ***"I gave her time to repent."*** In his great mercy, Jesus gives this woman some time. The time is coming, though, when the Lord will take care of this situation and will ***"throw her on a bed of sickness,"*** unless she repents. Notice, though, Jesus says that she ***"does not want to repent of her sexual immorality."*** I would just point out here: Sometimes repentance isn't a matter of "wanting" to! Sin is appealing. Sometimes, we need to repent – not BECAUSE of our feelings, but IN SPITE OF our feelings. The heart is deceptive. If I wait for my heart to tell me to repent, I might be waiting a long, long time. Repentance is a change of mind, resulting in a change in the way we live.

I'm guessing the ***"children"*** in this passage probably represent this woman's followers. But notice: They will be punished as well. They can't claim, "Somebody deceived me," and think they can get away with it. Yes, they might have been deceived, but they are also responsible. Everybody in this situation needs to repent: Every Christian for tolerating this woman, Jezebel herself needs to repent, and her followers need to repent.

Years ago, I remember talking with somebody, and as the conversation progressed, I noticed they kept saying that God wants us to "come as we are." And I understand the thought, but it was starting to interfere with what we were actually learning from the Bible. But the young man kept saying, "come as you are," so finally, I said, "You keep saying that God wants us to come as we are, so would you mind showing me where it says that in scripture?" And, of course, it doesn't say that anywhere in the Bible. And yet he kept saying, "God says to come as you are." But God never said that. I didn't think about it at the time, but wasn't he being a prophet? A prophet is somebody who speaks for God. But God never said what he said God was saying. That's Jezebel. She would have loved the "come as you are" argument. And yet, even if we "come as we are," we are not allowed to "stay

as we are.” And that’s what God wants here: He’s looking for repentance. He’s looking for change. He’s patient, but there’s a limit.

At the end of this section, Jesus gives the reminder that “**...all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.**” So again, these people need to act. They need to do something. And Jesus will know who has obeyed and who has not.

Before we move on to the next section, I like to give a special warning to us here in Madison, and that is: A Jezebel can really do a lot of damage at a small congregation. A strong personality has a much greater influence over a group of 50 as opposed to a group of 500. We are susceptible to this, so we need to be especially careful; because, as we have seen here in Thyatira, even in an active and loving congregation, evil can very easily gain a foothold.

#### V. This criticism (or warning) leads us to the COMMAND.

In verses 24-25, Jesus says,

***24 But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you. 25 Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.***

What we appreciate here is: Jesus doesn’t want to make our lives any more difficult than they already are! If you haven’t fallen for this thing Jezebel is doing, then just keep up the good work. Keep on growing in love, and faith, and service, and perseverance. Keep on doing what you are doing! **“Hold fast until I come,”** Jesus says. And it seems to me that one important part of holding fast is that when somebody comes in and says, “God told me to tell you something,” we need to open our Bibles to check it out, even before they stop talking. **“Hold fast,”** the Lord says.

#### VI. As we come to the end (in verses 26-29), we come to the CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

***26 He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; 27 AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also 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.’***

Those who overcome and keep the Lord’s deeds are promised **“authority”** and the **“morning star.”** In some sense, the faithful will rule. He doesn’t explain the **“morning star.”** Literally, we know that the morning star is usually considered to be the planet Venus when it shows up in the east right before sunrise. People go wild interpreting this, but it seems to me that the simplest explanation is probably best. The **“morning star”** is a sign of hope. If you’ve had a hard night, the morning star says: Things are about to get better! Later in Revelation, Jesus refers to himself as the **“bright morning star”** (in Revelation 22:16). But it seems the message is: When things get tough, remember that things will get better.

**Conclusion:**

The message to Thyatira (and to us here in Madison) is this: Jesus knows our deeds, and if we are growing and getting stronger, that is great; however, whenever we run into a Jezebel in the congregation, whenever we run into somebody who claims to speak for God when they really do not, we cannot tolerate that. In the meantime, hang on to Jesus!

As we close, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the God with eyes like flames of fire and feet like burnished bronze. You see us for who we really are. Nothing is hidden from your sight. You see our struggles and our strengths. You know when we are tempted to sin. You know our concerns. You know what keeps us up at night. You know what we try to hide from others. We pray that you would search our hearts and lead us in the everlasting way. We are living in a dark world, but we look forward to seeing Jesus, at the dawn of a new and eternal day.

Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for your word. Thank you for lifting our burdens.

We come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)