

THE LETTER TO THYATIRA: “WORLDINESS”

Revelation 2:18-29

Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities in Revelation. Pliny the Elder, a Roman author, philosopher, and military commander described Thyatira as “one of the unimportant cities of Asia.” Yet, while Thyatira was not as prosperous as Ephesus or as beautiful as Smyrna or as powerful as Pergamum, it was important commercially and militarily. And the reason for its importance was its location.

Thyatira was located in the Lycus River Valley, at the juncture of three great roads: the road to Pergamum, the road to Sardis, and the road to Smyrna. In antiquity these roads were major trade routes which, according to one historian, transported half of the world’s goods. Of course, the same roads that brought trade brought invading armies. So, early in its history, Thyatira became a military outpost for the capitol city of Pergamum. As a first line of defense, Thyatira was not meant to repel invaders, but to delay them until Pergamum was ready for battle. Thyatira, then, was both a necessary city and an expendable city, frequently destroyed and rebuilt throughout its existence.

Thyatira was known for its bronze and textiles, and especially for its production of purple dye. As a flourishing commercial center, Thyatira contained more trade guilds than any other city in Asia Minor. Archaeologists have identified such guilds as dye-makers, slave-traders, textile-workers, coppersmiths, tanners, potters, and others. Each guild had its own name, its own property, its own product, and its own patron god. And somewhere amid the hustle and bustle, businesses and bargains, guilds, goods, and gods of Thyatira existed a small Christian congregation.

Nothing is known of this congregation’s founding. The Apostle Paul traveled in the vicinity of Thyatira during his second and third missionary journeys. And when in Ephesus for two years, Paul was only one hundred and fifty miles from Thyatira. Of those two years in Ephesus we read: **“This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord,”** Acts 19:10.

When Paul traveled from Asia Minor to Europe and entered the city of Philippi, he met a woman named Lydia. According to Acts 16:14, Lydia was a **“dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”** Perhaps this same Lydia returned home to Thyatira and shared the Gospel of Christ which she had learned from Paul.

Regardless, while we don’t know who founded the First Christian Church of Thyatira, we do know the circumstances within the church when Revelation was written. And thankfully, some of the circumstances were good. Jesus said, **“I know your deeds, your love and faith,**

your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first,” Revelation 2:19. A glowing report. A growing church; active, loving, serving, persevering. And yet, despite the growing and glowing, something was seriously wrong in the church at Thyatira; something dangerous to faith and poisonous to confession. What was it? In a word, **WORLDLINESS**.

And while worldliness was also a problem in the church of Pergamum, the difference was this: In Pergamum worldliness came from outside the church. In Thyatira worldliness also came from within the church—from the teaching of a self-appointed prophetess whom Jesus referred to simply as *that woman Jezebel*. He said, **“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,”** Revelation 2:20.

Whether Jezebel was this woman’s real name or a name Jesus used to describe this woman’s real character—its Old Testament associations are clear. The Old Testament Jezebel was the wicked wife of the wicked King Ahab; a woman so notorious for her conniving, lying, and murdering, that her very name became synonymous with treachery, carnality, and idolatry. The daughter of a Phoenician king, Jezebel gleefully promoted Baal worship in Israel, with all of its immoral and idolatrous practices.

The “Jezebel” in Thyatira was doing much the same; that is, teaching God’s servants to participate in idolatry and sexual immorality. And where was this happening? In all likelihood, it was happening in Thyatira’s many trade guilds—guilds that wielded enormous economic and political power, similar to that of modern labor unions.

I learned about the power of labor unions while attending a trade show at the McCormick Convention Center in Chicago, IL. Noticing that an extension cord in our display area was unplugged, I bent to connect it. Seeing this, a horrified union electrician hurried toward me waving his arms. “You can’t do dat,” he said in his clipped Chicago accent. “Why not?” I asked. “I’m just connecting a cord.” “Don’t matter,” he replied. “You gotta be in da union to do dat. You in da union?” No, I wasn’t. Had I connected the cord myself, the cost would have been nothing. But because union rules required a union electrician to make all electrical connections at the McCormick Convention Center, the cost of connecting that single extension cord was two-hundred and fifty dollars.

“You in da union?” A similar question was undoubtedly asked of every worker, every apprentice, every business owner in Thyatira. “You in da guild? You gotta be in da guild to work here.” Without membership in one of the many trade guilds, finding, getting, and keeping a job in Thyatira was virtually impossible. No job, no income. No income, no groceries, no medicine, no shelter.

So, why not join a trade guild? The trade guilds in Thyatira were not simply business organizations. They were also religious organizations that combined work and worship, goods and gods, sales and sacrifices. Each month, each trade guild in Thyatira held a ‘company meeting’. The meeting was also a worship service in which sacrifices were made to pagan gods. Afterwards, the meat sacrificed to idols became the main course at a company banquet. The banquet invariably degenerated into a drunken orgy staffed by Thyatira’s many brothels. In commercially-oriented Thyatira prostitution was a thriving business too.

Could a Christian belong to such a guild and participate in such immoral, idolatrous behavior, even if refusing to participate meant economic hardship? Of course not—to which a multitude of Bible verses testify. Among them: Romans 12:2, **“Do not conform any longer to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”** Or Ephesians 5:3, **“But among you there must be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people.”**

Yet, what God prohibited, the Jezebel in Thyatira promoted. And across the miles and millennia, we can almost hear her justifications. “Look, let’s be reasonable. Everyone else in Thyatira belongs to a trade guild. Why not Christians? Besides, Christians have to eat. God wants them to provide for their families. So, they have to join a trade guild. And in any case, God knows the circumstances in Thyatira. He’s omniscient. And in His providence He placed you here, didn’t He. So, God will surely understand a little infidelity, a little immorality, a little idolatry. Isn’t that why we have so much forgiveness? Stop worrying. Company orgy on Friday. Lord’s Supper on Sunday. Problem solved.”

Jesus concluded each of His seven letters to the seven churches by saying: **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** Churches. Plural. So, what lessons can be learned from the circumstances in Thyatira? Are there still conniving, deceitful ‘Jezebels’—meaning false teachers of any gender—within Christian congregations, who mislead God’s servants into sexual immorality, idolatry, and worldliness? Sadly, the answer is “yes”.

Consider the dispensers of the so-called prosperity gospel; teachers who value material wealth above the riches of God’s grace and view Jesus Christ as more of a heavenly banker than a divine Savior. Televangelist **Kenneth Copeland**, who said: “God needs you saved. God needs you strong. God needs you rich.” How is that not worldliness? Or **Creflo Dollar**, pastor of the *World Change Church* in Atlanta, GA, who said: “As spiritual beings who possess the nature of God, we have the ability to speak things into existence like God in Genesis 1.” How is that not idolatry? Or televangelist **Benny Hinn**, famous for his *Miracle Crusades*, who said:

“I am a ‘little messiah’ walking on earth.” How is that not blasphemy?

Or consider those Christian denominations that have officially endorsed homosexual marriage. Among them: Episcopalians, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, Pentecost International, certain branches of Catholicism, even the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. In fact, the ELCA has proudly ordained gay and lesbian ministers for the past ten years.

Friends, how is this teaching not a blatant compromise with the world? How is this teaching any different from the teaching of Jezebel in Thyatira—Jezebel who misled God’s people to commit sexual immorality? It isn’t different. And where is this worldly teaching originating? Not from outside the church; but as in Thyatira, from within the church. I wonder: How does the Lord Jesus view worldliness in His churches? Let’s turn briefly to His letter to Thyatira for the answer. And the answer is sobering.

First, the introduction of the letter. Jesus said: “**These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze,**” Revelation 2:18. A similar description of Jesus is found in Revelation 19:11-16, where “**His eyes are like blazing fire**” and His feet are treading “**the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God.**” This is not a comforting depiction of Jesus, is it? This is not the image of Jesus typically portrayed in Christian art or in Sunday School material.

Frankly, I most often associate the eyes of Jesus with looks of love and compassion. I associate His sandaled feet with His tireless traveling to proclaim the Good News of God’s Salvation; feet that led Him directly to the cross to atone for our sins. I imagine the deep compassion in the Savior’s eyes when He looked at the woman caught in the act of adultery; or at little Zacchaeus perched in a fig tree; or at Judas who betrayed and Simon Peter who denied; or at Mary and Martha weeping at the funeral of their brother Lazarus; or at the young ruler who parted ways with Christ because he could not part with his great wealth; or at the demon-possessed, blind, deaf, crippled—the vast multitudes who came to Jesus for help, health, deliverance, and salvation; the blessings He gave freely and undeservedly to all. Oh, those gracious, compassionate eyes of Jesus Christ. The same compassionate eyes that keep watch over you and those you love.

Yet, in His letter to the church in Thyatira, Jesus portrayed Himself in much starker terms; in a way that left no doubt about His view of worldliness in His churches and His view of those who teach and tolerate it. Here Jesus described Himself as having fiery eyes, piercing eyes, righteously indignant eyes, all-seeing eyes. Here He described Himself as having bronze feet and standing immovably on God’s truth; ready, if need be, to tread the winepress of God’s wrath and dispense judgment. And if the Kenneth Copelands and Creflo Dollars and Benny Hinns of the world were to picture Jesus this way—Jesus with flaming eyes instead of Jesus

with blind eyes—they might shudder. They might ask for forgiveness instead of asking for sizeable donations.

Second, the commendation and rebuke of the letter. Jesus said: **“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. 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,”** Revelation 2:19-20.

In many ways the church in Thyatira was a model church; a church characterized by love and faith, service and perseverance. Attributes commendable in any Christian congregation. And witnessing these attributes, the residents of Thyatira may have said: “That Christian church on the corner of Apollo Street and Purple Dye Avenue is a happening church, a welcoming church, a growing church, an accepting church.” But the same can be said of many churches today, especially the mega churches. At times, this is all people want to see. “How big is the church? How friendly is the church? How tolerant is the church? How strict is the church?”

But with His all-searching eyes, Jesus Christ sees far more. Yes, Christian congregations should be welcoming, friendly, loving, and persevering. But none of these attributes are of any value to others unless they are accompanied by the truthful and faithful proclamation of God’s word. For without the word of God, a church is nothing more than a country club or entertainment center. Without the word of God, a church has nothing of value to preach. Without the word of God, a church is the type of church Paul described in 2 Timothy 4:3, saying: **“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”**

Third, the warning of the letter. Jesus said, speaking of the prophetess Jezebel: **“I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 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. 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,”** Revelation 2:21-23.

Was Jesus warning against physical adultery in these verses or spiritual adultery? I can’t say with certainty. He may have intended both, because both practices were involved—sexual immorality and spiritual infidelity—in the teachings of Jezebel and the practices of Thyatira’s trade guilds. Rather, the important aspect of this warning lies in its starkness and its consequences.

The warning of Jesus is stark because the consequences of worldliness are stark. And the consequences of worldliness can be disastrous for faith and poisonous to confession. As someone said, “When a church cracks, the world seeps in.” And if a church looks like the world, speaks like the world, pursues the things of the world, how can it be distinguished from the world? In the all-seeing eyes of Jesus Christ, there is no such thing as a negligible or insignificant false teaching. If a teaching is wrong, it’s wrong. In Scriptural terms, it’s as permeating as a pinch of yeast and as potentially dangerous as a cancer cell. John wrote: **“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him,”** 1 John 2:15.

Finally, the promise of the letter. Jesus said: **“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 (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does My will to the end, I will give him 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. I will also give him the morning star,”** Revelation 2:24-28.

What is Jesus saying? He is saying: “Hold on to your faith. Don’t compromise your teaching, your church, or your life with worldliness. When I return, you will reign with Me. When I return, you will be with Me forever in the dawning of eternity.

There are many times in life when we, like the Christians in Thyatira, may face economic hardships and difficult choices in order to stay true to God’s word. Yet, whenever Jesus discussed the cost of following Him, He always assumed that we would gladly bear the loss in terms of the incalculable gain. Paul unquestionably felt this way, and so wrote: **“But whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith,”** Philippians 3:7-9.

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