

June 24th "Facing The Enemy Within": Rev 2:18-29

Of all the seven churches addressed in these letters Thyatira was the least in importance. One writer of that time, the elder Pliny, dismisses the city in which this church was placed with the phrase, "Thyatira and other unimportant communities." Yet it is Thyatira that receives the longest letter.

Now there are no doubt, many reasons for this. But personally I feel, after reading the letter, that our Lord valued the church at Thyatira so highly, that He desperately wanted His people to wake up to the peril that they were in, and to deal with the enemy lurking in their midst before it was too late, so He wrote this extra long letter to them.

You see this church had so much going for it. Of all the good things that Jesus says about the other churches, it's what He says about this church that has the most depth and the most promise. Look at 2:18-19

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Pettersen in the message paraphrase puts it like this:-

¹⁹"I see everything you're doing for me. Impressive! The love and the faith, the service and persistence. Yes, very impressive! You get better at it every day.

Now these were not simply flattering remarks aimed at making this group of believers feel good before Jesus told them what He really thought. The description explains that these were the words of the Son of God who cannot lie or deceive. And neither can He be fooled or misled; for He has looked upon these people with eyes that miss nothing. Eyes like blazing fire.

When He talks about their deep and sacrificial love....their faith.....their service and their perseverance.....He is not talking about things that appear good on the surface, but about things that are real to the core. He knows what is true in His people and He knows what is false for nothing gets past those burning eyes. And He begins with the one thing that makes their faith, service, and perseverance honouring to Him, and it's their agape love.

Here is something that we as a church fellowship, and as individual believers within the Body of Christ must constantly aim for. That when the Lord looks

at us He sees behind all that we are and do a real love for Him and for one another that is motivating us. And especially He sees that such love is achieving more in and through us now than it did last year, or the year before, or the years before that.

But what is this love that we call sacrificial love...What does it look like? It looks like God become man, hanging on a cross with His arms outstretched, His hands and feet dripping blood, His head pierced with a crown of thorns, crying out—Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

"A little four year old girl, hugging a doll in each of her arms, looked wistfully up at her mother and said; 'Mama, I love them and love them and love them, but they never love me back'. And sadly that is true of some Christians and some churches, who are loved and loved and loved by God, but never seem to love Him back with the same depth of love. But it was not true of this church at Thyatira.

In a sense they did have it easier than some of the other churches for there were no major Temples to other gods in Thyatira and no Temple to the Roman Emperor, and consequently no great persecution of Christians. Yet having noted that it must also be said, that often it's harder to practice real deep love for God and for one another when the pressure is off, than it is when the pressure is on, and all you have is the support of God and of fellow Christians.

The fact is that Jesus looked at His church in Thyatira and He saw love. At Ephesus He saw hard work. At Smyrna He saw afflictions. At Pergamun He saw faithfulness. But at Thyatira He saw love...God's love in them....and He was pleased.

But maybe it was this love for other that partly caused the problem they now faced. For this beautiful group of Christians had fallen into the trap of tolerating one who was evil. Look at v20-21

²⁰ 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. ²¹ I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.

The name Jezebel is of course a reference back to the Queen Jezebel of Jewish history who was married to king Ahab. She wasn't a Jew but the daughter of the king of Sidon whom Ahab had married in order to strengthen his kingdom. Spiritually, however, the Nation of Israel had suffered greatly

as Jezebel brought into Israel her gods and hundreds of prophets who led God's people away from the truth. Elijah's battle on Mount Carmel was against these prophets, and it was the anger of Queen Jezebel that caused him to run for his life.

So just by giving this woman the name Jezebel, Jesus lets His faithful know what her real plans are and who she really works for. For this woman had presented herself to the church as a prophetess of God but in fact she was acting as an agent of evil.

In reality, says Jesus, you have been tolerating her presence and influence because you think she is a servant of mine, but she is not. He then makes a separation between His servants.....v20 **"By her teaching she misleads my servants"**

And in v22-23, her followers:²² **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.** ²³ **I will strike her children dead.**

This is different to what we saw in the letter to Pergamun last week. They too had false teaching in their midst but it was held by members of the fellowship. Here it seems that the danger came from this important and powerful figure who had come into the church from outside with a group of followers. She was teaching the Christians things that were wrong and misleading them. And the big problem was that the faithful leadership of that church were allowing her to stay, and the longer she stayed the more damage she was doing.

In the 1980's when I was Pastor at Bunbury, there was a time when we had a spate of groups, who pushed some false teaching or other, who sought to influence the church. I remember one Sunday these two couples came into the church and they mixed really well with the congregation. They found out where the weekly home study group was held and on the following Wednesday night they turned up for the study. We had hardly started that study before they interjected with their viewpoint which saw salvation as dependent upon receiving a certain gift of the spirit, and if I thought otherwise then that made me a false teacher. In the end I had to eject them from that group and tell them that they were not welcome. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done and one of the most necessary.

So I can understand a little concerning the difficulty that faced the faithful at Thyatira. But for them it was not as clear cut an issue as it was for me at Bunbury. For it is suggested that this woman was a powerful figure in the

Trade Guilds that Thyatira was famous for. These trade guilds dominated the city and to work you had to belong to your specific trade guild and attend their meetings. Meetings that began and ended with a libation poured out on the altar to the god of that guild, for every guild had one. Meetings that included a sacrifice to that god, and the eating of the meat that had been sacrificed in a meal together. Meetings that usually descended into drunkenness and acts of immorality with the Temple prostitutes.

William Barclay writes:

“If in Thyatira the Christian merchant or trader or craftsman was a member of his trade-guild, and participated in its ceremonies, he would protect his business interests and ensure his material prosperity; if he refused to become a member of such a guild and refused to participate in its ceremonies, he was very definitely committing commercial suicide and would soon be faced with poverty, and even bankruptcy.”

So we can see that once a person became a Christian that type of behavior was not an option, yet how could they continue to work if they did not fulfill the requirements of their guild? The teaching of their leaders was to trust God and He would provide.

Yet the false teaching of Jezebel was to go ahead and do all that the guild required because it didn't matter. That God would understand. And she, as a prophet, claimed that she had the secret knowledge that supported such a view from the Lord Himself. Jesus calls it in v24 **"Satan's so-called deep secrets"**. Just think how inviting that type of teaching would be to a young believer!

But what Jesus tells them in this letter, and He does so as Judge, with feet of burnished bronze ready to stamp out evil. Is that He had already given this woman time to repent of her sin but she hadn't. So He will soon bring judgment in the form of intense sickness and even death upon her and her followers if they persist in their evil teaching. For Jesus will protect His people from significant error but at times His judgment will be delayed by His Grace, as He gives the heretic time to repent.

So here we have this church made up of believers who love God and one another and serve the Lord faithfully, with some members who are wrestling with the issue of guild membership as Christians. And also we have this Jezebel coming in with her group from outside, claimed to be a prophet and calling for compromise with evil, and up to this point the leadership have wrongly tolerated her presence. Not agreeing with her teaching but not telling her to leave either.

So what is it that Jesus calls them to do? Look at v24-25

24 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): 25 Only hold on to what you have until I come.

I like the fact that Jesus puts no extra burden on them. They are to stop tolerating the woman—that's already implied in the letter—but theirs is not the burden of carrying out any judgment on her. Jesus Himself will take care of that. All Jesus wants of His followers then and still today is that we hold on to what we have in Christ until He comes.

Hold on to our love. Hold on to our Faith. Hold onto the ministry He has called us to do. Don't compromise any of those precious things but simply trust Him through whatever valleys He may lead us, until He returns in triumph.

And it is this triumph that the rest of the letter is concerned with. Verse 26

26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations —

Then v27 is a quote from Psalm 2:9 about the future triumph of God's anointed One, the Lord Jesus Himself, over all His enemies.

27 'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery' —

And finally the most wonderful promise in v28

28 I will also give him the morning star.

Later on in Revelation 22:16(CEV) Jesus proclaimed:

16 I am Jesus! And I am the one who sent my angel to tell all of you these things for the churches. I am David's Great Descendant, and I am also the bright morning star.

In a most wonderful way we will be given Jesus as our Eternal Lord in all His glory when we get to heaven. All the trials and troubles of this age will be forgotten and we will be His and He will be ours. As one old hymn puts it:-

I've found a friend; O such a friend!

He loved me ere I knew Him;
He drew me with the cords of love,
And thus He bound me to Him:
And round my heart still closely twine
Those ties which nought can sever,
For I am His, and He is mine,
For ever and for ever.