

SERIES: Letters to Eight Churches

SERMON: To Thyatira: The Church of Tolerance and Compromise

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 2:18-29

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Several years ago there was a feature story in *U.S.A. Today* entitled, “Protestants face annual sexual divide.” The subtitle was “Same-sex unions, gay clergy, female leaders divide faithful.” Listen to the opening paragraphs:

Forget how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. How many views on gender, sexuality and church authority can fit under one church steeple? Should gay clergy be ordained? Are same-sex unions blessed before God the same as the marriage of a man and woman? May a woman lead a church? American Protestantism can be a free-for-all when supposedly like-minded believers get together. And this summer, as Presbyterians, Lutherans, American Baptists and others meet to choose leaders and set policy, these touchy topics may dominate—or derail—their agendas. . . The spotlight is on a three-letter word—and it’s not G-O-D.ⁱ

The word, of course, is S-E-X. A month from now our denomination, The Evangelical Free Church of America, will hold its annual conference in Denver. I’m happy to report that none of the issues mentioned in this article will be on the agenda, for we *will* be talking about G -O-D, not S-E-X. But sadly, much of the Protestant church seems to be consumed with finding ways around the Word of God. One mainline pastor was quoted as saying, “No nominating committee of mine has ever or will ever inquire into the personal sexual journeys of anyone looking (for ordination) . . . People are yearning for a sanctuary where no lines divide people, where there’s no part of your humanity you have to check at the door.” Apparently he has bought into the “don’t ask, don’t tell” rules of the military. As far as he is concerned, a pastor’s personal life should not affect his professional life.

The picture that was printed with this *U.S.A. Today* article shows the female pastor of the First Baptist Church in Berkeley, CA., leading the service and blessing same-sex couples. Another picture shows her lesbian partner, holding *their* son and greeting church members at the door after services. I want you to think about that picture as we read the letter Jesus wrote to the Church in Thyatira, as found in Revelation 2:18-29:

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 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. 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. 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 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

I have referred to the Church at Thyatira, the fourth in our series of Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches as “The Church of Tolerance and Compromise.” Their problem was essentially a failure in regard to holiness. Sadly we are beginning to see a downward spiral as we proceed through these letters. The Church at Ephesus rightfully excluded wicked people. The Church at Pergamum allowed them in the church. And now in Thyatira we find that one of their leaders is a flaming heretic and immoral to boot.

As with each of these letters, this one opens with some unique attributes of the Author that are particularly related to the situation in that church.

Attributes of the author, the Son of God (18)

Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of God, by a name not used in any of the other letters; in fact, this is the only time the name is used in the book of Revelation. This title probably emphasizes the majesty of His person and His position. He is having to deal with a church in grave trouble, but He is capable of doing so because He is the very Son of God.

Then Jesus refers to both His eyes and His feet. His eyes are like blazing fire, indicating that He sees everything that is going on, and His feet are like burnished bronze, referring no doubt to the fact that He will pursue all that is evil and stamp it out. This hint of judgment becomes a strong theme later in the letter.ⁱⁱ

Knowledge of His people and their deeds (19)

Jesus knows His church at Thyatira well. Among the things He mentions and commends them for are the following:

Their love and faith. I think it’s significant that these two are put side by side, for both are essential for spiritual health. It is easy for the person who loves people to be lenient about false teaching. On the other hand, it is easy for the expert on doctrine to come across as harsh and unloving. Among the positive things about this church is the fact that in general they had a certain balance between these two critical traits.

Their service and perseverance. Again it is important for these two characteristics to go together. Service is exhausting, and it’s very easy to become weary and even resentful because others may seem like they aren’t pulling their weight. This congregation was not only committed to serving but also to continuing, even when it was hard or when others weren’t helping.

More than before. Their progress is the last thing noted. They are not standing still, and

they certainly aren't regressing; they are moving forward in a life of growth and development, doing more now than they did at first. I like Eugene Peterson's rendering of verse 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." How are *we* doing? Are we standing still, going backwards, or getting better at it every day?

Yet the very next word is "Nevertheless . . ." Here is the same strong contrasting term Jesus used with the Ephesian church and the Pergamum church. In spite of the positive, encouraging things He is able to say about them, there is a serious problem among the believers in Thyatira. It can be summed up in two words: tolerance and compromise.

Criticism of tolerance and compromise in the Church (20-23)

The initial charge is, "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." While this church has many positive qualities, holiness if not one of them. It is permitting one of its female members to teach and practice outrageous behavior, and it has apparently made no attempt to restrain her. An enemy is being harbored in the midst of the fellowship.

If you're a student of the OT, you're undoubtedly aware that Jezebel was the notorious wife of Ahab, king of Israel about a century after King David. But that's over 900 years before this letter is written to Thyatira. So obviously Jesus is talking about another Jezebel, a current leader in the church. I doubt seriously whether that is her real name, for there are certain names (like Cane, Judas, Ahab, and Jezebel, that virtually no one would give their child because the names have been forever tarnished by the notorious individuals who first bore them. I think Jesus refers to this prophetess in Thyatira as "Jezebel" because that name had become proverbial for wickedness. In order to understand the allusion better, let us briefly look at the historical Jezebel.

The Jezebel of the Old Testament. The best way to introduce her is perhaps by reading what is said of her husband Ahab. In 1 Kings 16:31 we read this: "He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel." That's really a pretty remarkable statement, if you stop to think about it. Up to that point, Jeroboam had been the worst king of Israel. He had set up golden calves in Bethel and Dan, intentionally leading Israel into idolatry, and then he appointed anyone he wanted to be a priest, without consideration of God's qualifications. But this man Ahab was so evil as to consider the sins of Jeroboam trivial, insignificant, unimportant. But then in addition, beyond all that, he married Jezebel. She is identified as "daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians." Ahab married Jezebel because he wanted a political alliance with her father, despite the fact that God had warned the kings of Israel way back in David's and Solomon's time that such alliances could become their downfall. The Sidonians practiced Baal worship, which involved gross sexual immorality and even infant sacrifice.

What are some of the things Jezebel is known for? Well, she not only brought Baal worship into the highest levels of Israel's government, but she also systematically murdered the Lord's

prophets (1 Kings 18:4). But she is perhaps best known for the famous incident when the prophet Elijah took on the 400 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. The priests of Baal were Jezebel's personal clergy, and Elijah dared them to call on their gods while he called on Jehovah, the God of Israel, to see which God answered. Their efforts were feverish but fruitless, and Elijah ridiculed them.

“Shout louder!” he said. “Surely Baal is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy (this is a euphemism in Hebrew for using the bathroom), or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”

So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:27-29).

Then God vindicated Elijah by sending fire down from heaven to consume the sacrifice he had offered, even though he soaked the sacrifice three times with four large jars of water. Elijah then had the 400 prophets of Baal put to death.

Jezebel was incensed and responded by sending a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them” (1 Kings 19:2). Elijah was so frightened that he fled for his life. Kind of ironic, isn't it? One minute he takes on and defeats 400 false prophets and the next he's in a panic-induced exile of this one woman, Jezebel. But he knew this was no idle threat.

Still another chapter in the notorious life of Jezebel concerns a godly man named Naboth, who owned a vineyard next to the royal palace. Ahab wanted that vineyard but Naboth refused to sell it because God had commanded him not to. So Ahab pouted. Jezebel came in and asked him, “Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat? . . . Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! (in other words, “quit acting like a wimp!”) Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.” (1 Kings 21:5-7) And she did exactly that. She framed Naboth and had him executed. When Jezebel received word that her dirty work was done, she said to Ahab, “Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead.” (1 Kings 21:15) Just the thought of such ruthless behavior makes your blood run cold, doesn't it?

But I think the most telling description we have of Jezebel comes in the epitaph of Ahab found in 1 Kings 21:25: “There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on (stirred up) by Jezebel his wife.” She was the instigator and motivator and catalyst behind this Adolph Hitler, this Idi Amin, this Saddam Hussein of ancient Israel.

Now Jezebel's religion was essentially a combination of idol worship and orgies. Most of us can hardly imagine worship and open sexual perversion together.ⁱⁱⁱ Generally speaking, in our society nearly all religions make at least a pretense of teaching the values of marriage, family, and faithfulness. But as we saw in our opening illustration from *U.S.A. Today*, that is changing. What God has called an abomination in His Word, many *even* in the religious community are now calling normal and even holy. And that was apparently happening in the church at Thyatira as

well.

The Jezebel of Thyatira. Who is this woman? We don't know much about her, but we do know she claimed to be a prophetess and had a significant following. Prophets were very important in the early church, particularly prior to the completion of the New Testament. After the Apostles died off but before the church had a complete Scripture, prophets were relied on to proclaim the Word of God. These men and women were highly honored in the life of the church, but Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 14 about the potential for abusive influence on the part of prophets.

This woman is a case in point. I would assume she was a gifted speaker with a charismatic personality, and immature Christians were drawn to her. Jesus says (verse 20) that "by her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols." Notice how this Jezebel misled the members of the church—not by seducing them herself but "by her teaching." This could mean that she openly taught that free sex and idolatry is OK, but I doubt it. I can't imagine even nominal Christians tolerating that. I suspect it is more likely that her teaching was imbalanced and distorted to the point that her listeners were subtly enticed to engage in such behavior.

Let me share with you how that can happen. I can't help but think of one of the most gifted teachers I ever sat under. This man went to Dallas Seminary and pastored a church that Jan and I attended for a short time when we were first married. He had great communication gifts and could hold an audience in the palm of his hand. But over time I came to realize that his theology was not balanced. His emphasis was always on grace and rarely on responsibility, always on doctrine and rarely on duty, always on content and rarely on application. I also began to notice something in the lives of my friends who sat under his ministry for any length of time. If they weren't drinkers when they first went there, they started drinking. They started to use foul language and attend inappropriate movies. Many of their marriages ended up in divorce.

It's not that he openly promoted heresy or immoral behavior. But "by his teaching" his people slowly slid into carelessness and compromise. The kicker came when I learned that this pastor was involved in an affair with his secretary. Many of his parishioners—personal friends of mine—had their lives ruined by this man's influence. I suspect this is something like what was going on in Thyatira.

Friends, God is extremely concerned about moral purity in his church. Just consider these verses:

1 Thes. 4:3: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality."

Eph. 1:4: "He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."

1 Thes. 4:7: "God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life."

Whenever we become lax in regard to sexual purity, we are risking His judgment. But let me warn us that even if we are not involved in sexual immorality that doesn't necessarily mean we are innocent of the sin of Thyatira. One of the things you discover readily when you read the OT is that adultery and fornication are often used as symbols of spiritual unfaithfulness. Israel is often accused of adultery even when no physical immorality is involved.

When God's people put other things ahead of Him—whether it be success, prosperity, materialism, sports, fitness, financial security, or even ministry—He considers that unfaithfulness. He gets jealous; after all, we are being unfaithful to the One who created us, loved us, died for us, and is one day coming again for us. He will tolerate no other lovers. The seductive teaching of Jezebel is a real danger *even* in the evangelical church today.

Perhaps if I offer a little background on Thyatira, you will understand better how this Jezebel was able to cast her evil spell upon the church. One of the things this city was famous for was its trade guilds. These were like union shops for wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers and bronze-smiths. (In Acts 16:14 we are told that Lydia, convert to Christianity in Philippi, came from Thyatira and that she was a “seller of purple.” No doubt before she became a Christian she was in the dyers guild, because it was nearly impossible for a citizen to participate in trade and industry without membership in the appropriate guild).

Along with their commercial purposes, these guilds played a key role in the social and religious life of the community—they held banquets dedicated to pagan deities, and these often degenerated into wild, no-holds-barred parties. Perhaps the Jezebel of Thyatira was telling her congregation, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Participate in the culture! After all, God doesn't care what you do with your body—it's your heart and mind He wants.” One can readily understand why some people would welcome this kind of gnostic heresy. It allowed them to maintain the appearance of a Christian profession while living the wild life—the best of both worlds. But it was heresy. Remember what Paul wrote in Romans 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your *bodies* as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”

Every generation of Christians must face the question, “How far should I go in accepting and adopting the cultural standards and behaviors of my day?” Where does being contemporary cross over into compromise? The problem, you see, is that we Christians are caught between two worlds. We are citizens of two countries, and we cannot renounce either. We are citizens of earth and, at the same time, citizens of heaven. The cause of Christ is not served if Christians come across as dinosaurs trying to hide from the real world. The Amish, for example, are not winning the lost to their faith; they are just a curiosity, and they are fortunate if they even keep some of their own children among the faithful. But by the same token, the cause of Christ is not advanced if we buy wholesale into the world's values and become chameleon Christians indistinguishable from its permanent residents.

“Compromise” is a good word in some situations. All of us need to be willing to give and take

regarding many issues in life. A politician who is unwilling to compromise is going to be a very lonely voice. A spouse and a parent need to learn how to compromise as well. But compromising the essentials of our faith or our moral purity can be fatal.

Let me go back to the eyes of blazing fire mentioned in verse 18. Jesus sees everything. He reads thoughts and understands hearts. The wicked persuade themselves that their wickedness will never come to light. Isaiah writes, “Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, ‘Who sees us? Who will know?’” I’ll tell you Who: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13). In verse 21 we begin to see the results of God’s judgment in Thyatira.

Looming judgment for tolerance and compromise (21-23)

It begins with suffering for Jezebel. “I have given her time to repent, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering.” It’s not clear how or when this opportunity for repentance came, but it indicates an important biblical principle: the Lord’s judgments are not hasty—He gives time for repentance. But that time is limited. Isn’t it ironic that Jezebel will end up on a bed of suffering since her influence has led to the violation of the marriage bed. Her punishment will fit her crime. But she is not the only one who will suffer.

Judgment continues with suffering and death for her inner core of disciples. “And I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead.” This could refer to those who committed literal sexual immorality, but I think it is also a reference to the spiritual adultery that her followers engage in when they accept her false teaching. The mention of “her children” is probably a reference to her most avid followers.

A wake-up call for all the churches. “Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds.” Discipline in the church always has several purposes: One is correction in the sinning person’s life. An even more important purpose is restoration—always the goal of biblical discipline is to bring the person back to the Lord. But the highest purpose of discipline may be to instill a healthy respect for the Lord among the people of God.

In Acts 5 we have the well-known story of Ananias and Sapphira, two members of the earliest church in Jerusalem. Together they agreed to lie about a piece of property they sold, claiming they were giving *all* the proceeds to the church when they only gave *some*. Now the Apostle Peter made clear that they had the perfect right to keep some of the money, in fact, they could have kept all of it if they wanted to. But they did not have the right to lie to the Holy Spirit and to the Church. And both were struck dead. Bam!

Here is the final statement in the story of Ananias and Sapphira: “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” I guess so! I think great fear would come also upon the church today if God disciplined us in the same way or with the same speed. The point

of God's judgment on Jezebel and her cohorts is: "Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds."

The final issue of judgment is expressed this way: "I will repay each of you according to your deeds."

Payback to each person according to his deeds. This is confusing to some people, for they are familiar with passages to the effect that God will not count our sins against us and will bury them in the deepest sea. But then they read passages like this which indicate that we will be held accountable for our deeds. I think both are true. Believers in Christ will never face eternal condemnation for their sins, but they will be held accountable for their deeds when it comes to the handing out of eternal rewards.

Encouragement to the faithful: Hold on until I (Jesus) return! (24,25)

There is a godly remnant in Thyatira, for not everyone has succumbed to the influence of this modern Jezebel. I like these two verses, especially the way Eugene Peterson expresses their intent in *The Message*:

The rest of you Thyatirans, who have nothing to do with this outrage, who scorn this playing around with the Devil that gets paraded as profundity, be assured I'll not make life any harder for you than it already is. Hold on to the truth you have until I get there.

This verse is important for those Christians who seem to have the notion that God is impossible to please. They get this notion from parents or teachers or preachers or from books, not from The Book. Jesus says to those who have resisted this false prophetess, simply "hold on." He knows it's tough and their grip is weakening. He doesn't demand perfection; He doesn't blow them away by reciting their failures; He just says, "Only hold on to what you have until I come."

There may be some of you this morning who are almost at the end of your rope. You're discouraged, you're depressed, you're feeling like a failure, and life seems ready to crush you. Just hold on to what you have. Yes, holding on until Jesus comes may seem like a long time, for we don't know when that will be. One thing is certain—it can't be any further away than our own death, because to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

Promises to the overcomers (26)

They will receive authority over the nations. There are a number of passages in both the New and Old Testaments that promise the overcoming believer that he will become a co-regent with the King of Kings. It is a serious misnomer to think that heaven consists of sitting on a cloud while strumming a harp. We're going to be busy serving and worshiping and ruling. The OT passage Jesus quotes here in verse 27 comes from Psalm 2, a Messianic Psalm. The immediately preceding verse offers this promise from God, "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Psalm 2:8). That is not the missionary verse it has often been used for; it's a verse promising to Jesus that He will inherit all authority and power, and we will be fellow-rulers with Him.

They will receive the morning star. More than likely Jesus is here promising His people His own eternal presence, for at the end of Revelation He calls Himself “the bright Morning Star” (Revelation 2:16). Of course, the one who has put his or her faith in Jesus Christ has His presence with him right now. But the promise here is that we will enjoy Him in a new and intimate way, and for eternity, when we have overcome and done His will to the end. The ultimate reward of the Christian is to be with His Lord.

This letter, as the others, ends with the challenge, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” It would be easy for us to think that we are far from the Church at Thyatira. We don’t have any women heretics that I am aware of, much less one that might be called a Jezebel. We don’t take a casual corporate attitude toward sexual immorality, and we certainly don’t promote idolatry. But I think we might be congratulating ourselves too soon. I received a letter from someone in church recently, and he agreed to let me quote from it. It says in part,

The teachings in my fundamental church where I grew up were so stilted, negative, irrelevant and rigid, especially when compared to the behavior and lives of those who were church members, that it caused me to forsake the church altogether and become a sexually immoral hedonist. They said all the right things but with a spirit of condemnation and pompousness that turned nearly all the young people off. The Word of God that was supposed to bring forgiveness and life was ministered in such a way that it brought guilt and death.

Friends, can even dead orthodoxy be a subtle tactic of Jezebel and her lying boss, Satan? It’s always easier to focus on the outrageous examples of heresy and apostasy that we see in the mainline churches or the cults and forget to look inside to see what we are tolerating in our own circles. May we be like the Christians Paul commended in Acts in the city of Berea, who searched the Scriptures daily to see if the things being taught were genuinely from God.

Conclusion: These letters are all written to the church, to professing believers, not to unbelievers. But the fact is, in every local church there is a mixture of believers and unbelievers. I want to say something to anyone who may be listening as an outsider. You’ve been reading someone else’s mail. You’ve been listening to what Jesus is saying to His Church. But you need to realize that as harsh as His judgment will be on His Church, it will be even harder on those who are outside His family.

Jesus is “the Morning Star,” “the light of the world.” Do you want Him to light up your life, to forgive your sin, and to give you eternal life? He will. All you have to do is acknowledge your need for the forgiveness Jesus offers, and He will adopt you into His family—the family of God—the family where even Jezebels who repent and turn from their evil ways are forgiven, cleansed, and welcomed.

i. Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Protestants face annual sexual divide: Same-sex unions, gay clergy, female leaders divide faithful,” *U.S.A. Today*, Wednesday, June 6, 2001.

ii. G. K. Beale draws some fascinating parallels between the introductory comments in the letter to Thyatira and the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the book of Daniel. The three Hebrew children were saved by “one like a son of God(s)” (Daniel 3:25). The heavenly “Son of man” had “eyes like flaming torches” and “legs like the gleam of burnished bronze” (Dan 10:6). Beale suggests convincingly that just as the “Son of God” protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego even during persecution (Dan 3:25), so also Christ will do this for the overcomers in Thyatira. This interpretation ties the attributes of Christ not to the judgment of Jezebel and her followers, but to the protection of the faithful.

iii. The closest parallel in our society may be ritualistic Satan worship, involving the sacrifice of animals (even babies?) and the systematic sexual abuse of young victims. There are those who would have us believe this kind of thing is just a figment of the imagination of mentally disturbed people, but the fact of the matter is that some people *are* probably mentally disturbed because they have actually experienced such traumatic events.