

## A Tale of Seven Churches: Thyatira Revelation 2:18-29

### **Slide 1**

This is the longest letter and yet it's addressed to the church that was situated in the least important city of the seven. Thyatira is located about thirty-seven miles southeast of Pergamum.

This city had no distinguishing features. It wasn't situated on a harbor like Ephesus or Smyrna, nor was it on a hill like Pergamum. It was in the middle of a valley.

Yet, it was on the road that the Imperial Post travelled which connected Pergamum and Sardis. While it may not have been a large city it was a thriving city.

It was a city of merchants and manufacturing. And being a commercial city it had a large number of trade guilds. So, it could be said that Thyatira was a union town.

Thyatira was also considered the gateway to Pergamum, the capital of Asia Minor. Therefore, an armed garrison was stationed there to protect the capital.

But, Thyatira itself wasn't capable of a sustained defense since it lay in the middle of an open valley.

The best that Thyatira could do was to be a speed bump to slow an advancing army until Pergamum could prepare a defense.

### **Slide 2**

The city is first mentioned in connection with Paul's missionary labors in Europe. His first convert on that continent was a woman of Thyatira, Lydia, a seller of purple, a commodity for which the city was famous. (cf. Acts 16:14 )

Religiously, it had no special significance. It wasn't a center of Caesar worship like Pergamum, nor Greek worship like Ephesus.

The two notable things about the city, from a religious perspective, was that it had a local god by the name of Ty-rim-nus, whose image was on their coins, and a fortune telling shrine presided over by a female oracle called the Sambathe.

Religious persecution wasn't an issue for the Thyatira church. It was live and let live environment, but there was economic persecution that came as a result of the trade guilds.

These guilds represented different trades in the city, but they were much more than just a union, the guilds operated like service clubs, so their influence in the community was substantial.

The guilds usually held common meals in one of the pagan temples which would begin and end with a formal sacrifice to the various gods.

The meat served during these meals would have been meat offered to one god or another. And if that wasn't bad enough, the meals often became an excuse for excess and often degenerated into immorality.

And so, the question was: Should Christians be involved in guilds when their involvement would include, at the very minimum, attendance at these events.

The only other option for a Christian was to not belong to a guild.

However, due to the far-reaching influence of these organizations this option would virtually guarantee economic ruin and commercial collapse.

### Slide 3

Again, Jesus begins the letter by introducing Himself and this time there's no missing the description. It's plain and simple.

Revelation 2:18, *"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."*

Most commentators agree that this is a description of two of Jesus' attributes. That He is all seeing and all powerful. Others add that the description of his eyes reflects His anger over sin and that he sees deep into our hearts and interior motives.

Jesus continues, as He does in all but one of His letters, with praise. Revelation 2:19, *"I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."*

This sounds good. None of these traits are passive, they're all active and they're all positive.

As in most of His letters, Jesus begins with the words, *"I know your deeds."* Jesus knows everything we do, the good the bad and the ugly, He knows it all.

When you helped that little old lady across the street He saw that, the extra hundred you slipped into the offering plate He knows that, the time you spend in prayer and scripture reading, He sees that.

He also saw the time you cussed the driver who cut you off in traffic, the hurtful thing you said to your spouse or child, what you read, what you watched and listened to.

Someone said that character is how you behave when no one is watching. Well, remember Jesus is watching.

If you have any reason to doubt what I say, listen to what Jesus says a little further along in the letter.

Revelation 2:23, *“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 that’s scary! And with that said, Jesus begins to tell them what it is that He knows about the church at Thyatira.

#### **Slide 4**

Three of the four qualities mentioned in Revelation 2:19 are listed as fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5:22-23a, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*

Their love, the love mentioned here, is not a wishy, washy type love that’s spoken of in popular media.

This isn’t a word that would be used to describe feelings for just anything. You wouldn’t use it to tell someone how much you loved a pizza or pledge undying loyalty to your spouse.

Instead, the Greek word used here for love is Agape. Agape love is an all giving, non-demanding love. A love that loves regardless of what’s in it for me. This type of love can only be put in your heart by Christ Himself.

This is the type of love that Irish Missionary Amy Carmichael defined when she said, *“You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.”*

The second thing that Jesus commends these believers for is their faith. Their faith wasn’t just a believing faith, it was a perseverance that overcame. It was the highest form of loyalty.

A faith that says, *“I may not understand but that’s okay.”* Oswald Chambers said, *“Faith is deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time.”*

If we could always understand God, then He wouldn’t be much of a God. He doesn’t ask us to always understand Him, instead He asks that we always trust Him.

That’s why the Bible says in Hebrews 11:6, *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

## **Slide 5**

It’s these first two attributes that leads to the next two attributes. The first being service.

St. Augustine said, *“What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.”*

Agape love inevitably must reveal itself in service. And while service isn’t mentioned specifically in the fruit of the spirit, it’s implied in goodness and kindness.

If love doesn’t cause you to do something to ease a person’s burden, then it may be pity you feel or sympathy but it’s not love. This word service means anything done voluntarily out of love or concern for someone in need.

James, the brother of Jesus, speaks of this in James 2:15-16, *“Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?”*

Tony Campolo tells a story about being a guest speaker at a mission rally in Philadelphia. During the meeting the chairperson reported a prayer request from a missionary doctor in Venezuela.

The demand for her services was so great she was having to turn people away. She needed to raise \$5000 to add an extension to their medical center.

Having shared the prayer point, the chairperson asked Tony to lead the meeting in prayer that the \$5000 would be raised. He said, No!

He declared he would only pray after every person in the room had emptied their pockets and placed all their cash on the table at the front. Then he would pray for God to make up the shortfall.

Tony began by putting his hand into his pocket and pulling out everything he had that day - just \$2.25. He put it down on the table and then asked the chairperson to do the same. She hesitated and said, *“Thank you Dr Campolo. I think we’ve all got the point.”*

*“No! I don’t think we have!”* He said. *“My \$2.25 is on the altar. Now it’s your turn!”* So the startled and embarrassed woman opened her wallet and pulled out \$10 she had.

Tony then went around the room and got every person to do the same. By the time they finished they had \$8000.

Tony concluded by saying, *"The audacity of asking God for five thousand dollars, when He has already provided us with more than eight thousand dollars. We should not be asking God to supply our needs. He already has."*

Finely, God recognizes their patient endurance. This is another part of the fruit of the spirit. This endurance comes from faith that God's in control and is coming again.

It's not about being resigned to whatever happens, *"Oh well, I can't change it so I might as well live with it."* B.C. Forbes said, *"Many a man thinks he is patient when, in reality, he is indifferent."*

Do you truly believe that God's in control, no matter what? Do you really know what it is that you're waiting for? Woodrow Wilson said, *"All things come to him who waits -- provided he knows what he's waiting for."*

The Bible is full of promises. Promises for today, promises for tomorrow, promises for the here and now, and promises for the there and then.

But, unless you read the book, you won't know what those promises are. You'll just be waiting with a vague sense of: *"Things will get better."*

You need to take the time to find out what it is that you're waiting for.

### **Slide 6**

Then, I love this next statement. *"And that you are now doing more than you did at first."* Growth!

Do you remember what the church in Ephesus was criticized for? For losing their first love.

And at that time, we spoke of how our initial response to the gospel is often full of enthusiasm but, as time goes along, it cools down and we lose our first love.

That wasn't the case here. They just kept getting better and better. Christianity isn't supposed to be stagnant; it's supposed to be vibrant and exciting. It's supposed to be about growth

1 John 1:7, *"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."*

Did you hear what James said? Not if we stand or sit in the light, but if we walk in the light. It's a matter of growth. Can Jesus look down at your Christian life and say, *"I can see your constant improvement in all these things?"*

Or are you a case of arrested development. You grew for a little while and then you stopped. Too many people blame the pastor saying, *"Well I'm just not being fed on Sunday."*

What would happen if you only ate on Sunday? You'd eventually starve to death. Well, for some of us it would take a while. My prayer, when someone tells me that, is *"Lord teach them to eat."*

It's up to you to grow, and by growing you become the Christian you're supposed to be.

Motivational speaker Les Brown summed it up when he said, *"In the end, it's the person you become, not the things you have achieved, that's the most important."*



## Slide 7

By this time, the church must have been feeling pretty good about themselves since Jesus seems pretty pleased with them.

That is, until we read the word “Nevertheless.” It’s just another word for “but.” Remember after “but” comes the truth.

“Nevertheless” is one of those transitional words that aren’t always pleasant or positive, although they can bring both good and bad news.

The operation went well Mr. Smith, however we amputated the wrong leg, but we think we can save the other one. So, here it comes!

*Revelation 2:20-21, “Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. 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.”*

They compromised their faith.

Before we examine the complaint that Jesus has against this church, let’s realize that those qualities that the church in Thyatira are being praised for are very enviable.

In fact, many Christians here in 2020 lack those qualities in their lives. But, just because they had so many good things going for them, that doesn’t excuse them from their faults.

It appears that this woman Jezebel, and by the way that probably wasn’t her real name because of the negative connotations that would have gone with it.

That would be like naming your child Saddam Hussein or Dracula or Adolph Hitler.

Whoever this woman was she had convinced some of the believers in the church that she was a prophet and taught them that they could indulge in actions that was not acceptable Christian behavior without the ultimate consequences.

If we were to put this condemnation into a historical perspective it would appear likely that Jezebel had convinced some in the church that God would understand if they joined the trade guilds and indulged in their festive dinners. After all people have to live, don't they?

The sexual sin that Jesus speaks of could be figurative, implying spiritual infidelity, a metaphor that was used throughout the Old Testament.

When the Christians in Thyatira partook of meat offered to idols they figuratively, as the bride of Christ, became adulterous.

However, the fact is that the church, having lowered its standards in spiritual areas, was bound to eventually lower them in the areas of morality. Do you see the progression?

In Pergamum they tolerated people that taught these things, and here in Thyatira they permitted Jezebel to lead people astray.

This is why scholars would say that the church in Thyatira represents the Dark Ages, between 600 AD and 1517 AD.

Now, the church in Thyatira didn't go from being a model church one day to a church involved in these practices the next.

I'm sure that ten years before, if the congregation in Thyatira had been told what they would eventually accept, they would've denied it, "*Not us, never.*" And yet here they are.

The fact remains today, as we lower our standards in a few things it becomes increasingly easier to lower them in all things.

An old middle eastern proverb says, *“Once the camel puts his nose in the door of your tent if won’t be long before he’s sleeping in your bed.”*

I’m sure the phrase that Jezebel used was: *“everyone else is doing it.”* The major downfall of this church was their toleration of sin.

Regardless of the outward appearances of religiosity, regardless of the wonderful things a church does, regardless of how accepted a church is, if its clergy has gotten to the place where sin is tolerated and encouraged, then the church has become apostate and adulterous.

Once we forsake the Bible as the ultimate authority for our beliefs, our actions, and our morals, we’ve lost the right to be called a Christian church.

The warning is this: a church that’s crowded with people and overflowing with activity is not necessarily a real church.

It’s possible for a church to be crowded because its people come to be entertained, not instructed; to be soothed instead of confronted with their sin and the offer of salvation. It becomes a Christian Country Club rather than a real Christian congregation.

## **Slide 8**

### Conclusion

Yet Jesus gives them a promise.

Revelation 2:24-26, *“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, except to hold on to what you have until I come.’*

*To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. To all who are victorious, who obey me to the very end, I will give authority over all the nations.”*

He tells them to Hold tight, be victorious, don't give up. What happened in Thyatira isn't limited to churches; individuals can fall as far and as hard as an entire congregation.

Men and women who once accepted the authority of Christ and the direction of the Word of God, who began to falter, where one sin led to another and another until finally, they're no different than the world.

But these apostates refused to give up the title, *“Child of the King.”* Whether they're entitled to heaven or not won't be resolved this side of eternity, but they're not entitled to smear the name of Jesus with their actions.

The promises of Christ are to those who overcome and are obedient until the end. Hebrews 11:40, *“For God had far better things in mind for us that would also benefit them, for they can't receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race.”*

So, where you? How's the race going? You've started, are you still running?