

The Church in Thyatira Revelation 2:18-29

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A pastor told the story of being called to a church with a lot of issues. The church was dwindling and needed to change.

He was able to dramatically change the way a lot of things were done, but there was a lingering problem. It was the people.

You see, the church thrived on conflict. It was as if they lived for it. It didn't start that way, but somehow, somewhere, conflict crept in.

It wasn't intentional, it wasn't planned. Nobody ever thought, *"Hmm, I think it would be so much fun to bring conflict into the church,"* it just happened.

Meetings, meetings, and more meetings were held. Ground rules had to be posted, but many of the people believed they could offer their opinion in a loud and confrontational manner.

You could raise your voice, tell someone they were wrong in a not so nice way, then they'd go out for a meal together. It was part of their culture. The way of the world had crept into the church.

I believe this scenario was very similar, in many respects, to what was happening in the church in Thyatira.

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Thyatira was the fourth church on the circuit. As with the others, it was located in Asia Minor, or present-day Turkey.

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Thyatira was a small community and not as famous as the other cities at which we've looked.

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Thyatira was known for its trade guilds or unions. There were trade unions for carpenters, bronze workers, cobblers, potters, tanners, weavers, tent makers, and more.

If you were a potter or metalworker, you joined a trade union that met at the local pagan temple. The city was even located on a major trade route which helped its economy.

Along with the regular trade businesses came idol worship, drunkenness, and a great deal of sexual perversion.

It was a package deal. You couldn't say, *"I want to be in this trade union, but I'll skip the idol worship."* That wouldn't work in Thyatira.

This is probably why Thyatira received the longest letter. It's a reminder that all churches, large or small, are important to Jesus.

Nobody can say, my church is too small, so Jesus doesn't care about us. The letter begins with a description of Jesus.

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."*

God's telling the church that He sees all things and overlooks nothing. It's like when someone seems to stare a hole through you, and you start to feel uncomfortable. Well, that's the image John wants the church to get.

Jesus sees all that's going on. His burnished bronze feet are representative of His power and strength to execute judgement.

The trade workers would have fully understood the power of Christ through this imagery.

Jesus is speaking their language. Jesus is telling the people of Thyatira, listen to me! Then He starts praising them. On the surface, it sounded like an amazing church.

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.”*

Jesus is telling the church that He’s proud of them because they’re growing in who He’s called them to be. They’re a group of faithful, powerful, courageous believers in Christ who’re growing in faith and service.

Think about it. Their works, i.e. love, faith, service, and patient endurance, were evident, and they were getting better at it. This is powerful praise.

They were growing spiritually, which was evident in the work they were doing.

They were loving one another, caring for one another. They were helping, and at the same time, they were persevering through persecution and hardship.

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But there was something else going on in the church, and it wasn’t good. Somehow, in the midst of their growth, they allowed an ungodly woman to rise to a place of enormous spiritual influence.

Revelation 2:20, *“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.”*

This verse causes us to have a lot of questions but no answers. Who was this woman? How did she rise to prominence in an otherwise excellent congregation?

Jesus referred to her as Jezebel. This wasn't a good name to be called. The Israelites knew all about Jezebel. She was the daughter of a pagan king who married King Ahab.

After she married Ahab, she led the entire nation to Baal worship. Under her influence, evil was perpetuated, and Jezebel became a symbol for sin.

So, how could a woman like this come to power in the church? Here's where we can go back and look at that church I mentioned in the beginning.

The confrontational attitude in that church didn't happen overnight. I'm sure it started slowly. It probably crept in through one person, who raised their voice.

Part of the problem in that church and which most churches are guilty is that we don't like to confront sin! We kind of pass it off.

“Oh, that's just the way they are,” or *“They don't mean anything by it.”* So, we allow it to fester, and when we do that, it grows.

It's like a virus that's not contained. It's like putting a lot of yeast into flour, and the dough grows and grows. It's like the old movie, *The Blob*. The Blob kept getting larger and larger.

We don't notice our kids growing, but before we know it, they're taller than we are. Sin just kind of happens and it shocks us.

It overwhelms us. We must be wary of it, not just at church, but at home, at work, and at school.

When we allow sin to fester, it's like mold. If you don't stop it, if you don't clean it up and kill it, it'll continue to grow.

That's what was happening in Thyatira. The people were doing great works for Jesus. They were loving one another and growing in good works in the name of Jesus, but they allowed sin to creep in.

It was growing and if they didn't do anything about it, it would change the trajectory of the church. In other words, it would kill the church.

Jesus tells us that we can't serve two masters. You'll love one and hate the other, yet sometimes we do that. We don't realize it, and we'd never say we hate Jesus since we love Jesus!

But when we allow sin to filter in, it impacts us. It slowly changes us. While we publicly say, "*We're against it,*" we find ourselves buying in to the sin, as we kind of justify it.

Thyatira was dealing with sexual sin. Regardless of the sin, whether it's sexual sin, gossip, unresolved anger, pride, greed, envy, addictions or whatever, it can enter your lives very subtly.

This problem of the church in Thyatira came as a woman who appeared to be a prophetess, but she was a false prophetess.

Peter tells us 1 Peter 5:8, "*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*"

Peter's says to be clear minded. Literally he's telling us to be sober and vigilant. That we must be prepared for the ways the devil tries to destroy us.

Think about it. How does a lion attack? Usually by prowling around so quietly that we don't hear it or see it, until it's too late and it pounces on us. That's the same with many sins. Before we realize it, we're deep in it.

Because Satan is so deceptive, we need to be aware. We must always be clothed in our spiritual armor.

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Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, *“And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.”*

Satan wants us to think that he's good, truthful, loving, and powerful – all the things that God is.

To portray himself as a dark, devilish being with horns would not be very appealing to most people. We're not drawn to darkness, but to light.

It would be obvious if Satan were masquerading as a source of evil. Most people would stay away. So, Satan seeks to be a servant of righteousness, that's how we justify our sinfulness.

The question that comes before us is this: *“How can we discern which light is of God and which light is of Satan?”*

Our hearts and minds are easily confused by conflicting messages. How can we make sure we're on the right path?

Again, think about the way the world wants us to perceive God and how we're to accept everything and anything people do. It's easy to give in and slowly believe that what's wrong is actually right.

Psalm 119 is one of the most powerful psalms with what it tells us, especially the many ways it tells us to follow God's law.

For example,

Psalm 119:1-3, *"Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart—they do no wrong but follow his ways."*

Psalm 119:10, *"I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands."*

There are countless examples of God's call in our lives to know His Word. Why? So we'd be able not only to combat evil, but to see it before it even attacks.

The Word of God and our relationship with God are our most powerful tools. We're all going to be tempted, but God always, always gives us a way out.

The Words of God have power. Just as God's voice spoke physical light into existence, it can speak spiritual light into our hearts.

Exposure to His Word helps us recognize the difference between the light of God and that which is counterfeit.

Moses told the Israelites, over and over again, *"BE OBEDIENT to God and you will be blessed. If you don't, you will suffer."* That's true for us as well. We're called to follow God and know His Word, so we can discern good from evil.

Yet, we see people who aren't following God who seem to prosper, so we think, "*Well, if they can do it, so can I.*" But we don't know the end of the story.

All we can see is what's happening in the here and now. We can't see into a person's heart and realize how miserable they might be. We can't see their future and know that their hearts have not been given to God.

Jesus tells if we we're willing to lose our lives, we will save our lives, but if we seek to save our lives, we will lose our lives.

It sounds like double talk! But He's telling us don't give in to the ways of the world. Don't buy what Satan's selling. Don't give in to the mantra of immediate gratification. Instead, hold onto God.

James tells us in James 4:7-8a, "*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.*"

In other words, move towards God, and you'll experience God. God will draw closer and closer to you, and, if you flee from the devil, he'll flee from you.

I've been dwelling on the negative part of this letter to the church, but for any church to be healthy, the whole has to be healthy. If one part is damaged, then the whole is damaged.

If one is wounded, we're all wounded. If one is victorious, we're all victorious. It's the beauty and power of the church. It's a synergistic relationship we have with one another.

Satan presents sin to us as something pleasing and beautiful. He's the craftiest salesman ever. He wants us to desire all he has to offer. He presents false teaching as enlightening and life changing.

Millions follow his deceptions simply because they don't know God's truth. Just look at the world around us and you can see how his influence hasn't been for the betterment of humanity.

Darkness is a result of attempting to find truth without the Word of God. This is why Satan masquerades as an angel of light; it is so effective.

Satan turns white to black and black to white. He gets us believing that God's the liar, that God is the source of darkness. Then, in our distress, we focus our hatred towards the only One Who can save us.

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Now Jesus has a word of encouragement for the church. For those who won't give in to Jezebel, Jesus said,

Revelation 2:24-25, "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.'"

The phrase "*so-called deep secrets*" gives us a clue to what was going on. Jezebel enticed her followers by promising them knowledge.

Knowledge through experiences that came from some combination of pagan ritual, Christian symbolism, and sexual experimentation. All under the banner of learning "*deep secrets*" that other people don't know.

False prophets love "*deep secrets.*" Think about it. Don't we love it when someone says, "*Let me tell you a secret?*"

Why be stuck with the Bible when you can enter into a world of signs, omens, and prophecies that give you insight into the "hidden world" that regular Christians don't have?

Jesus has only one command to His faithful followers: HOLD ON! Don't give into her seductive schemes. Don't join those who follow her teachings.

It's not always easy. It looks like they're having all of the fun, and for the moment, they thought they were! But those few moments of fun and pleasure will be replaced with an eternity of suffering.

So, HOLD ON!! Use the spiritual resources you have. Use the power which is at your disposal. That power and strength is Jesus!

Now, Jesus comes to the end and gives this promise to the church:

Revelation 2:26-28, "To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—that one 'will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery'—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give that one the morning star."

Jesus is the Morning Star, the one who conquers and has all the power. 2,000 years ago the world crucified Jesus, but one day He'll rule the world with an iron scepter as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

If we're faithful, we'll share in His victory. We'll know Him for He is the One who lights up the heavens.

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Conclusion

So, what do we learn from this letter? We learn that the world is making many demands on us and we're expected to accept all ways of doing all things. Nothing is excluded.

If you're not willing to accept all ways to live, then you're viewed as a narrow-minded, intolerant bigot. The philosophy of the world is if it feels good, it must be good, so do it. If it feels right in your heart, then it's alright.

Remember what Paul told Timothy,

2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when people 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. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

It sounds like we're living in that time right now!

Can't you imagine Jezebel saying, *"You need to make a living and God doesn't expect you to starve. Don't be worried. God told me it's alright. It's okay to participate in immoral and idolatrous worship."*

That sounds great, doesn't it? It's enticing. After all, she knows more than I do. And the sad fact is, we're good at rationalizing away our behavior, when we know it's wrong.

It's like the man who was on a diet, but he wanted a donut so bad he could taste it.

He knew he shouldn't have it, so he prayed, *"God, as I drive to the bakery, if there's a parking space in front of the bakery, then I know you want me to have a donut."*

So, he came to the bakery and sure enough, there was a parking space, on the 12th time around the block.

We laugh, but we play that game too, don't we? We rationalize our way into compromise, which leads to sin.

So, what have you been rationalizing lately? What are you tempted to rationalize away right now?

Jezebel's voice isn't silent in the 21st century any more than it was in the 1st or in the 10th century BC.

You can count on the devil whispering to you: *"You're unhappy in this marriage and God doesn't want you to be unhappy. It would be wrong for you to go through life being unhappy so you better leave. Or maybe, you can hook up with someone for some fun on the side, that will make it better."*

Pick your topic, and we can rationalize all we want!! The Jezebels of today say, *"You don't need to obey God, He doesn't care."* *"You don't have to give to the church, God doesn't expect you to tithe in these economic times."*

What's a little white lie, everyone does it. After what they did to you, you don't need to forgive. They should rot! It's your body, you can do what you want with it, nobody can tell you what to do!

If you've been living life like this, you worship the god of rationalization. You know what it's like to hurt and feel pain.

You see, there's pain in sin, but there's power, strength and freedom in forgiveness and obedience.

We may still have to live with the consequences of our past, but we can have the burden of guilt lifted from our heart.

2 Corinthians 5:17, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"*

You can have Jezebel or you can have Jesus, but you can't have both.