

CHRIST'S COMMITMENT TO HIS CHURCH

Tolerant Thyatira
Revelation 2:18-29
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CULTURAL BUZZ WORDS

There are always buzz words in culture that infiltrate conversation and shape thinking. When you hear certain words and catchphrases, often our minds try to grasp their meaning in the context they're used. Each generation is affected by the buzzwords of their day, but those words can often change in their usage and meaning over time. In the 1920's "The Cat's Pajamas & the Bee's Knees" meant something was excellent, outstanding. "Cool" (excellent, clever, sophisticated) and "Keeping up with the Joneses" (competing lifestyle status among neighbors) were popular phrases of the '40's. "Hipster, Groovy, Daddy-o" were terms to describe a trendy, hip and innovative person in the 50's-60's. Slang words such as "Bodacious" (beautiful), "Gnarly" (exceptional, very cool), and "Wicked" (excellent, great) dominated the 1980's. In the 90's, words such as "Diss" (show disrespect) and "Phat" (cool, hip) were invented; and by the 2000's "Newbie/newb" (newcomer; inexperienced), "Peeps" (friends), and "Sweet" (beyond cool) continued to reshape familiar language.

Language through the years continues to expand and morph by its cultural context. Something you might have said previously may not be understood or meant the same way today. Today's buzz words such as TOLERANCE, ACCEPTANCE, INCLUSIVITY, INTERSECTIONALITY are being used to redefine cultural norms and force affirmation of beliefs that are contrary to the clear teaching of God's Word. The pressure to conform and not disagree with progressive culture - or else face the societal consequences - is bearing down on those who believe otherwise. The Bible does use terms such as tolerance and acceptance, but not with the same meaning as applied by culture today. There are things Christians should and should not be tolerant of in each generation. True tolerance is not defined by what is promoted and accepted in every changing society, but as clearly revealed in the unchanging Word of God.

The church's struggle is not with language or buzz-worthy phrases, the church's battle is a spiritual warfare that has been raging for 2000+ years and will continue to rage until Jesus Christ returns.

"For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12 NLT)

The content of our battle and combat against our enemy remains the same, even as the context changes. The focus of Revelation is on Jesus Christ (1:1-3), and the application of His messages is to His Church (1:11-20). Jesus Christ's messages to His churches in Revelation are just as relevant today as when they were written. The historical churches that John recorded Christ's messages for also represent a progressive arc of church history through the ages. Each church dealt with real issues, real people and real threats. Each church was under the righteous examination of Jesus Christ and subject to His authority.

The pattern of Christ's examination follows a format: *City, Christ, Commendation, Criticism, and Correction*. Not all churches addressed necessarily require a one-one correlation for our church to self-examine today. Some aspects may be more applicable than others; but each church addressed is meant to warn and equip us to identify the doctrinal and spiritual issues we are similarly facing in order to stand firm with our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our examination of the church at Thyatira, **WE ARE CHARGED BY JESUS CHRIST TO BE INTOLERANT OF DEVIANT WORSHIP BY HOLDING TIGHTLY TO HIS TRUTH AND PROMISES.**

I. THE CITY: THYATIRA

Thyatira was located approximately forty miles southeast of Pergamum. It was situated in a valley between Pergamum and Sardis, and served as a defensive gateway to the Province's capital, Pergamum. It was well known for its various trade guilds (similar to unions) of cloth, metal working, wood and dyeing industries, making it a wealthy and economically healthy city. In order to maintain a successful business in this region, belonging to one of these trade guilds would be absolutely necessary. Each of these guilds would also have had a patron god or goddess to which they worshiped and held feasts in their honor. Any participation in these common meals would have included eating meat sacrificed to idols, along with whatever drunken parties and loose morality that ensued. Following Christ while living in this community would mean facing choices of compromised worship to God, as well as facing consequences of being excluded from vital business associations and partnerships.

*ESV Acts 16:14 "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of **Thyatira**, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul."*

The most famous convert from Thyatira was a business woman named Lydia who was saved through the ministry of the apostle Paul. She met Paul and Silas in Philippi by a river while worshiping God [Acts 16:11-15]. It is likely they went to Thyatira with Lydia where her household was also saved. Possibly the church in Thyatira was started from Lydia's household.

Little else is known or recorded in church history about Thyatira. Even though it is the least known of the churches in Revelation, it received the longest message from Jesus Christ. There are many similarities in its message that seem to be later reflected in Revelation 14-18 and the spiritual battles encountered. The issues facing the Thyatiran church are a sober warning for any church age facing the pressure to compromise in a culture of tolerance and approval.

II. CHRIST REVEALED

Revelation 2:18 *And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. [cf. 1:14-15]*

Daniel 10:6 *His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.*

Jesus Christ as the Son of God is the one who has worthy authority to carry out God's righteous judgments on mankind. The description of Christ is the same seen by the prophet Daniel centuries earlier. Jesus Christ is the one who examines the hearts of men and executes judgment according to our actions. He is not deceived as His "eyes like a flame of fire" pierce through to the inner core of your being to search and reveal motives unseen by others. The bronze metalwork of the Thyatirans held no comparison to the One "whose feet are like burnished bronze" that enforce God's powerful judgment.

Everyone falls under the authority and judgment of God, but Jesus Christ is primarily concerned with the motives and intentions of His people. Later He states, "And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works." (vs.23) Many types of examinations are unpleasant. Certain medical exams are uncomfortably invasive, personally intrusive and always embarrassing. However, they are necessary treatments in order to prevent or diagnose issues properly. Job performance reviews, marriage counseling or school exams may be difficult to undergo but are helpful to assess and make corrections. Jesus Christ isn't simply interested in your performance, He wants your heart. His searching eyes pierce to your inner person exposing your motives so that He can apply His grace and mercy for your good.

Hebrews 4:12 *"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*

III. THE COMMENDATION

Revelation 2:19 *I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.*

The church is concisely praised for its obvious activity, love and faith for God. In fact, they kept getting better in their work of service through the years. Their trend was the opposite of Ephesus, whose lack of love affected their work of ministry. The Thyatiran Christians were faithfully doing great things for God and increasing in their efforts. It is not known what they were specifically doing, but considering the healthy economic status of the city and possible wealth of the believers (Acts 16:14) they most likely were contributing and supporting many ministry efforts.

A mark of a healthy church is persevering labor and increasing works of ministry. Many churches often die a slow death when they stop loving one another, no longer walk by faith, and eventually grow tired and burnt out doing ministry in their own strength.

If our church is to remain healthy, then we need to be increasing - *not decreasing* - our work of service to the body. *How are you increasing in ministry?* Where are you exercising love, faith and service with endurance? Don't resign your post, or take a prolonged break from serving. If you're waiting for someone to ask you, or life and family to just "get in order" first, it might never happen. Walking by the Spirit means you are involving yourself in the lives of those around you and participating in ministry opportunities the Holy Spirit reveals to you.

IV. THE CRITICISM

Revelation 2:20 *But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.*

However, accomplishing great things for God and obtaining a good reputation does not make up for a lack of holiness in Christ's church. The guilt of Thyatira was their tolerance of sexual impurity and deviant worship. There seemed to be a prominent woman in the church who had deceived many into accepting and participating in activities directly condemned by God. [Acts 15:29; 1 Thess.4:3]

In contrast to the Ephesian church that exercised great discernment but lacked love, Thyatira showed great love but poor discernment. As Warren Wiersbe noted, "*Truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is hypocrisy.*" Their inability to test this false teacher led to dangerous compromise within the church.

There are certain baby names most parents try to avoid because of who that name represents. Jezebel is an infamous name with a worse reputation. Most likely the woman's name was not Jezebel, but was a label Jesus used to describe her influence.

1 Kings 16:30 *"And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him. ³¹ And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him."*

Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab in Israel. During her influential rule alongside Ahab, Jezebel integrated Baal worship into Israel with the intention of eradicating all worship of the one, true God. The push to incorporate and normalize pagan worship, along with the sexual deviation that accompanied Baal worship, permeated and further corrupted Israel's worship. Jezebel manipulated her husband to carry out her wicked plans and even succeeded to a certain extent. Her wicked reputation continues long after her death.

*"Just as Jezebel in Elijah's day took the lead in changing the religious doctrines and deeds of the people, so the self-styled prophetess in Thyatire boldly taught her nefarious philosophy with little or no opposition."*¹

¹ Lehman Strauss, *The Book of the Revelation*, p.65

Tolerance first came from within Thyatira. Even though the text is not clear how this teaching was integrated into the church, it is clear that it involved impurity of worship and body. Knowing the cultural context of Thyatira it is apparent that to be accepted by society, to maintain a certain status or preserve livelihood, that adopting worldly standards and accommodating certain lifestyles was expected. You can hear the conversation and imagine the arguments for why Christians in Thyatira *should* participate in the guild's common meals where meat sacrificed to idols was served (Acts 15:29). Downplaying issues of sexual immorality and dismissing their consequences is an enticing pathway to involving yourself in heinous sin (1 Thess.4:3).

How does an apparent thriving church allow this to happen? It begins with believing the lie that you can have the best of what this fallen world offers and the best God offers. The temptation to try and gain the best of both worlds is called out by Paul in **Galatians 6:7**, *"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."* This lie leads to NOT taking the Word of God seriously, and no longer CONFRONTING sin. When a church strays from teaching sound doctrine and becomes slack in morality, they have stepped onto a slippery slope of self-destruction.

Revelation 2:21 *"I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works,"*

The actions of Queen Jezebel and the seductive teaching of this woman reveal their true source, Satan, *"what some call the deep things of Satan"* (vs.24). It is no surprise that sexual purity and true worship are where Satan primarily attacks. Yet Jesus Christ is jealous for your holiness and personal purity. He will not allow these types of sins to go unchecked within His church. He gives grace by offering repentance from these beliefs and actions. But there is an expiration date on His offer; at some point sin must be dealt with. Jesus pronounces His judgment upon the woman while warning those who follow her will receive the same judgment unless they turn away. Such specific and swift justice warns all churches that Christ does not tolerate deviant worship or immorality.

*"Here is a warning. A church which is crowded with people and which is a hive of energy is not necessarily a real Church. It is possible for a Church to be crowded because its people come to be entertained instead of instructed, and to be soothed instead of confronted with the fact of sin and the offer of salvation; it may be a highly successful Christian club rather than a real Christian congregation."*²

² William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, vol.1, p.104

V. THE CORRECTION

Revelation 2:24 *But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. ²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come. ²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. ²⁸ And I will give him the morning star. ²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

The unrelenting pressure to compromise in a culture that strives to normalize sin is exhausting. It feels inescapable and somewhat inevitable that these types of sins will eventually make their bed inside the church. It happened in Thyatira and it is happening in churches today. But there is MERCY and HOPE for the remnant of those who do not succumb to these false beliefs.

First, Jesus Christ offers mercy by affirming their faithful perseverance and not laying any other weight of duty upon them. He does not instruct them to do more or greater things, He simply charges them to continue to hold tightly to sound teaching and true worship as marked by love, faith, service and endurance. He knows our weakness under pressure and He merciful comes to your rescue by gently calling you to remain faithful.

Second, Jesus Christ offers hope in the reality of His second coming and our privileged position. The believers in Thyatira might have felt overwhelmed and treated as outcasts, but the day will come when they will be standing alongside the true King as shepherd-rulers over His people. The promise as quoted in **Psalms 2** of Jesus as the Lord's Anointed ruler is now also applied to those He delegates authority to be fellow conquerors and rulers with Him.

The greatest reward for our hope is receiving the morning star, which is Jesus Christ Himself. *"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."* (22:16) Jesus Christ is your best and greatest hope to keep you from tolerating sin and enabling you to overcome through perseverance the pressure to compromise in a seductive world. Hold tightly to the authority of God's truth by setting your hope on His future grace to be rewarded at His return. ***"Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*** (2:20)