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Series: *Body-Building Lessons from the Seven Churches*

Title: *Thyatira*

Text: Revelation 2:18-28

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How many of you remember this old Michael Jackson song lyric:

*I always feel like somebody's watchin' me
And I have no privacy (Oh-oh-oh)*

*I always feel like somebody's watchin' me
Tell me, is it just a dream?*

If you can relate to those words, if it feels like YOU have no privacy, it's not just a dream. These days somebody is watching you everywhere you go.

- The bank watches you when you get money out of the ATM.
- Speed cameras watch as you drive by---making sure to send you a ticket if you drive too fast.
- The epass cameras watch you as you drive down the ICC.
- Your neighbor watches you when you stand at their front door and hit that RING doorbell.
- 2.5 million people in the U.S. have drones---and they love looking down on you from up high.
- You are watched whenever you enter a store with those cameras designed to catch shoplifters.
- You are watched in elevators.
- You're being watched from the heavens as well. More than 1,700 satellites monitor our planet. Their cameras can see detailed images---and thanks to Google Earth can be viewed by a total stranger.

I mention this because in the letter to the FOURTH church in the book of Revelation, Jesus tells us He has been focusing His all-seeing eyes on the church that was located in Thyatira. Take your Bibles and turn to Revelation 2:18-29 and you'll "SEE" that Jesus saw.

Revelation 2:18-29

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.

19 – I know [I SEE] your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

20 – Nevertheless, I have this against you: [I see that] 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.

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. Then all the churches will know that I am He Who [sees and] searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

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.

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

27 – ‘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.

28 – I will also give him the Morning Star.

29 – He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Now, as we have done with the three prior letters we have studied—I want to begin today by giving you some background. This is important because, to properly understand Scripture, we must have a proper understanding of the CONTEXT in which it was written. This is ESPECIALLY true when we study the symbol-packed verses of the book of Revelation. We have to know who it was written to and what their lives were like back then. Contextual information like that will help us to clearly SEE the eternal principles in this text that God wants us to apply to day-to-day life in our own day and age.

Let me give you a somewhat contemporary EXAMPLE of this particular principle of Bible study. (I have borrowed this from something John Ortberg wrote a while back) Imagine that in the late 1990's you came across the following excerpt of a story from *The Chicago Tribune*. With the CONTEXT of that time and place in mind, see if you can figure out what it means. Here goes---remember Chicago, 1999:

“The bull which once ruled the earth has had a mighty fall. The great right horn, whose number was twenty and three, let the reader understand, has departed. And the left horn, likewise, is gone, as is the third horn, which was pierced in many places and dressed like a woman. And the Hornets and the Timberwolves and all the beasts of the fields have gathered to devour the flesh of the Bull.”

Any thoughts? Here's a hint—if you were reading this in *The Tribune* in 1999 what SPORT would you be reading about? Right—BASKETBALL—specifically the career changes of basketball stars: Michael Jordan, Scotty Pippen, and Dennis Rodman---who has been known to dress like a woman and has indeed been pierced in many places.

But, if you weren't a professional basketball fan—if you didn't know about the Chicago Bulls—well, then you could read any meaning into these words that you wanted and that kind of error happens a lot when people study the book of Revelation. They don't dig and study—they don't **“...rightly divide the word of truth...”** and that keeps them from understanding the meaning God intends in these words and these people end up teaching all kinds of “bull”—all kinds of weird things.

So, whenever we study the Bible, we must always start with the historical context—especially as we study this---the LAST book of the Bible. Otherwise, we end up with facts that are more hysterical than historical.

With that in mind, let's begin by DIGGING into the contextual background of the letter to this fourth church. Thyatira—which is a city in modern-day Turkey called Akhisar—Thyatira is located about 35 miles east of Pergamum---and would have been the fourth stop a 1st century mail man would have made in delivering these seven letters. Patmos to Ephesus, Ephesus to Smyrna, Smyrna to Pergamum---and Pergamum to Thyatira—a town that is located in a valley---which means it had no natural fortification at all. I mean, it wasn't on a high hill like Pergamum---and although a Roman garrison was stationed in Thyatira—that garrison's job was not to defend Thyatira but just to fight a delaying action against any invaders---fighting long enough for Pergamum, the capital up the road to get prepared for the coming attack.

In short, Thyatira was thought of as DISPENSABLE in military terms. In fact, many scholars have noted that ironically this, the LONGEST of the seven letters, was written to the smallest and least important of the seven cities. Pliny the Elder spoke highly of the city of Pergamum but he dismissed Thyatira as worthless. In one of his writings he says, *“Thyatira and other unimportant cites...”*

So, this town wasn't a bright spot on the map back then. And to help you understand it's insignificance---I want to point out that there's a lot of things that Thyatira was NOT:

- It was not a city of political importance.
- It wasn't the capitol of a province.
- It was not a city of particular religious importance in the 1st century. Unlike Pergamum, it was not a center of either the worship of Greek gods—or of the worship of the emperor.
- Thyatira had no glorious past.
- No famous figure was born there.
- It had no harbor.
- Finally, it was not a cultural—academic center. It had no library—and as far as I know, it had no theater.

So, Thyatira was pretty much a “*plain Jane on the plain*” kind of town. In fact, Thyatira only had ONE claim to fame. You see, it was located on a major trade route which led it to become well-known for its TRADE GUILDS. Thyatira had more guilds than any other town of its size. There were guilds—or trade unions—for carpenters, bronze workers, cobblers, potters, tanners, weavers, tent makers, etc. all making a living from their trade along this trade route. And perhaps the most famous guilds were the dyers guilds—people whose career was dying clothe certain colors—especially the color PURPLE. You see in those days, purple die came from the madder root—a root that grew all around Thyatira. And you may remember that, as Acts 16 tells us, LYDIA, the trader in purple cloth that lived in Philippi and helped start the church there—LYDIA was from Thyatira. Many believe that she eventually returned to her “*plain Jane on the plain*” hometown and started the church to whom this letter is written.

In any case Thyatira was pretty much a “blue collar” town and I’m not downplaying that kind of work. I’m just saying that all the jobs were for tradesman and to make any money you had to join one of these guilds. Now, the members of these trade guilds were expected to share a common meal on a regular basis, but it was much more than a covered dish supper. You see the meal was eaten in a pagan temple and the food you ate was meat that had been sacrificed to a pagan god. Each guild had its own god—sort of a “*heavenly mascot*” —and all guild members were expected to participate. These trade guild meals were infamous for degrading into evenings filled with drunkenness and sexual immorality. Remember that because we’ll come back to the implications of all this guild stuff later.

Before we go any further, I want you to note that Jesus refers to Himself in verse 18 as the “**SON OF GOD.**” I point this out for a couple reasons. First, this is the only time Jesus refers to Himself in this way in the entire book of Revelation. And second—contrary to what many skeptics say—it is one of MANY times in the Bible that Jesus makes this claim. Jesus repeatedly said and showed that He was God in the flesh. In our current Grace-Group Study, Nabeel Qureshi does an excellent job of pointing this out.

In any case, as verse 18 says, this is Jesus Who is speaking here—God, not man—and as God, Jesus SEES things that others miss. His powerful eyes even give Him constant, intimate knowledge of our secret thoughts and motives. Here are a few proof texts:

- In Jeremiah God says, “***For My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from My face, nor is their iniquity hidden from My eyes. I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.***” (Jeremiah 16:17, 17:10)
- Hebrews 4:13 says, “***And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to Whom we must give account.***”
- Isaiah 29:15 - “***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?’***”

Well, as you hear these verses, remember this fact—GOD SEES ALL! Nothing is hidden from His sight. He even knows our thoughts. We often delude ourselves in thinking that no one knows something or other—but God does! To quote an old movie plot, “*He knows what you did.*”

Anyone feeling a little uncomfortable right now?

Okay, according to our text—and CONtext—what did JESUS know—what did He SEE when He looked at the church in Thyatira with “***eyes like blazing fire?***”

1.) Well, first, Jesus saw some GOOD things.

In His letter, He paid the members of that church great compliments. In fact, of all the churches of Revelation no church got more praise than the congregation in Thyatira. Look at verse 19 where Jesus says, “***I know—I SEE—your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and [I see] that you are now doing more than you did at first.***”

So, first off, Jesus SAW that there were Christians in this church who “***let their light so shine before men---such that not only men but GOD could SEE their GOOD WORKS.***” Thyatira apparently rivaled Ephesus in their busy Christian service,

for Jesus basically said, *“Not only are you working hard—you’re working HARDER! You are doing more than you once did.”*

But that’s not all—Jesus SAW that they exhibited the LOVE that Ephesus lacked and persevered in the FAITH that many Pergamum Christians were losing. These are great compliments indeed because God’s greatest command is for us to LOVE Him and each other. As Jesus said in Luke 10:27, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind---and, love your neighbor as yourself.”* And, as Hebrews 11:6 says, *“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.”*

On top of their love and faith, like Smyrna the church in Thyatira had members who displayed the virtue of PATIENT ENDURANCE in the midst of tribulation. So, you could say Jesus looked at this church and saw that it was like a beautiful garden in which the best Christian graces blossomed---humble ministry and patient endurance on the one hand and on the other, that trinity so often described by Paul: faith, hope, and love. I mean—to an outside observer—Thyatira would have looked like a great church. If we visited there we would have been impressed even after one Sunday.

2.) But Jesus also saw some BAD things.

In the same way that an apple can look great on the outside but have a worm on the inside—this church looked perfect but beneath the surface a part of it was rotten and the rot was spreading. Of course, the sad truth is—all it takes to turn something good into something very bad is one “worm” — one busy little destroyer. I mean, if we are not careful, then contrary to another Michael Jackson song lyric—one bad apple CAN spoil the whole bunch babe.

I’m reminded of the story about a man who wanted to sell his house. Another man wanted to buy it but could only afford HALF the asking price. Well, after much bargaining, the owner finally agreed to sell his house for half the price—but under one condition. He retained ownership of one small nail which protruded from just over the front door. The buyer thought that one nail could not be much of a big deal so he readily agreed---and they went to closing. After several years the original owner decided he wanted the house back but the new owner said, “no.” So, the first owner went out and found the carcass of a dead dog and he hung it from the single nail that he still owned—the one right above the front door. Because of the stench, soon the house became unlivable, and the family was forced to sell to the owner of the nail.

The moral of this story is that we must never give evil a foothold in our lives—or in our churches---because if we do, its stink will spread and threaten the health of the entire body.

Think a minute. Do a little introspection. LOOK at yourself. Does the devil own a “nail” in your life? Does he?

Well, the “nail” or “worm” in this church was an evil woman that Jesus refers to as *“Jezebel.”* This wasn’t her real name. In fact, a literal translation would be, *“that ‘Jezebel’ of a woman.”* Of course, the original “Jezebel” was the spouse of a weak-kneed king named Ahab who ruled the northern kingdom of Israel in the middle of the eighth century B.C. Ironically, the name, *“Jezebel”* is based on a word that means *“pure”* or *“chaste.”* But this woman made a mockery of that name. She was a prophetess of the cult of Astarte—a pagan goddess who sanctioned ritual prostitution and human sacrifice. This Jezebel became the wife of King Ahab---which made her queen of the Northern Kingdom.

At first, perhaps, King Ahab had simply entertained Jezebel at the door of his life. He could see no harm in showing a bit of hospitality to a visitor from the neighboring kingdom of Phoenicia. When they married, he may have told himself that under his influence she’d eventually convert to the worship of Israel’s God. Then when he helped her build a Temple to Astarte in the capital city of Samaria he probably told himself he was just being tolerant of other faiths. But when Jezebel brought in 850 prophets of her cult of wanton sex and violence---when she began the systematic slaughter of virtually all the prophets of Israel’s God (save Elijah)---Israel plunged into moral darkness and chaos reigned.

You may remember it was Jezebel who threatened to kill the prophet Elijah after he called down fire from Heaven and had her prophets of Baal executed. Jezebel also murdered her neighbor, Naboth, so that her husband could seize the

dead man's vineyard. Ray Stedman says it well when he writes, "*She was a ruthless, Godless, calculating, power-mad seducer of the people.*" 2nd King 9 says that she was known for witchcraft and idolatry. In short, Jezebel was far from PURE or CHASTE. I mean, she made it her goal to corrupt Israel as Balaam had done before her—and Ahab lacked the moral conviction to withstand her.

By the way, she died as it had been prophesied—thrown from the palace window into the courtyard below, where her body was set upon by dogs who licked up her blood.

Well since then the name JEZEBEL has been used an adjective to describe a wicked, evil person. And there was a woman like that in the church in Thyatira—a woman whose actions reminded Jesus of Jezebel. He saw that the Christians in that church either had a poor conscience or very weak courage—because they refused to silence her—much as Ahab let his wicked wife do whatever she wanted—including leading the nation in idolatry.

Now, as I said earlier, to make a living as a tradesman the Thyatiran Christians had to belong to a trade guild—but belonging to a guild meant they were pressured and probably required—to participate in immoral sexual practices and idol worship. So, these believers were confronted with a decision—in their minds they could remain faithful to God which would probably mean their families would starve—or they could go along with the trade union crowd and become involved with idol worship and the immorality that always goes along with it.

Well, this "*Jezebel of a woman*" was teaching in her Grace-Group that it was okay to submit to these cultural pressures—that God would overlook this sin. And, if this sounds familiar that's because you've heard it before. Jezebel was basically advocating the same kind of compromise that the Nicolaitans and the followers of Balaam espoused. But in Thyatira it was different.

According to Revelation 2:6, the church at Ephesus HATED, "*the practices of the Nicolaitans*" and would not tolerate them. The church at Pergamum had some in their church who held to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:14-15). But Thyatira not only had them—they actually allowed them—including this Jezebel of a woman—in leadership. She referred to herself as a prophetess—a title no one disputed—so her demonic teachings went unchecked.

Unfortunately, we commit the same basic sin when we don't love each other enough to discipline those in our midst who embrace sinful actions and philosophies and by their example lead others down the same road. As Paul writes in Romans 15:14, one proof that we have "*real Christian character and experience*" is that we, "*are capable of keeping one another on the right road.*"

Now, please don't misunderstand me—Jesus' problem wasn't that this Jezebel was a FEMALE prophet. No Scripture forbids a woman from exercising the gift of prophecy. In fact, there are Godly prophetesses in the Bible both in the Old Testament and the New. For example, Philip, that super-deacon from the book of Acts, had four daughters who were prophetesses—women who faithfully exercised their spiritual gift for the edification of the church. So, the problem with Thyatira's prophetess was not that she was WOMAN—but that she was a FALSE prophet in that she spoke for the adversary—not God.

Now, how can we tell a false teacher when we see one? What are some things to look for? How can we spot the "Jezebels" — both male and female — in our day and age?

A. First, they put down the AUTHORITY of the BIBLE.

One indication that an individual is false is that they question if the Bible really is God's Word—they question its teachings—especially if those teachings conflict with their views.

Decades ago, I joined the staff of a church as their Youth Pastor. Shortly before I arrived the discipleship pastor had led the church in a survey. The survey revealed that the entire congregation believed the Bible was God's Word. Plus—96% of those surveyed said they believed John 14:6 was true—that as our Lord said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.*" When we gathered to discuss the results of that survey the discipleship pastor

and his assistant laughed at that saying things like, *“These people are so immature---so ignorant. How can they believe that!?”* I said, *“Well, I believe it. Jesus is the only Way to Heaven, just like the Bible says. And, God’s Word is absolute truth.”* From then on, I was *“persona non grata”* with those two. I had several run-ins with the discipleship pastor because I had his children in the youth group and he didn’t like my teaching them the truth of Scripture.

Fortunately, that staff member left not long after that, but I was amazed that a person whose job it was to teach would not believe in truth---even more that a Christian, called to teach the Bible---would not believe in its authority. Peter warned us about people like this. He said,

“False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies---even denying the Master Who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter 2:1).

B. They lift up the authority of FEELINGS.

Their philosophy is, *“The Bible is not the only source of authority---EXPERIENCE is too---in fact I trust experience more than that outdated book. If it FEELS good---it must be GOOD.”* This is dangerous teaching because any time we let go of God’s written Word so that we can cling to experience that FEELS good---any time we do this we are headed for trouble. We must remember that one reason God gave us this book is because we are sinful beings who tend to go astray of His will---so we need this written WORD of TRUTH. We can’t trust our feelings---our hearts---for as Jeremiah 17:9 says, ***“The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”***

I know that “doctrine” is a bad word these “feelings-focused” days, even in many Christian circles---but we need the doctrines of the Bible. Within its pages God warns us of those who would tell us otherwise. In 2nd Timothy 4:3-4 it says, ***“The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up from themselves teachers---and they will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables.”***

This week I read about a new worship center that is being built in Berlin. It is designed to make everyone feel happy. It is called *The House of One* and it will enable Christians, Jews, and Muslims to worship under one roof. Each faith will have its own sanctuary surrounding a central hall that will serve as a place of public encounter. Contractors laid the foundation stone in May, 2021, and construction is expected to take four years. Roland Stolte, a theologian involved in the project says,

“East Berlin is a very secular place. Religious institutions have to find new language and ways to be relevant, and to make connections.”

The problem is, there are irreconcilable differences between those three faith systems. So---actually, the divinities that will be worshiped there are not Yahweh, Jesus, or Allah but diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion---FEELINGS above Biblical doctrine.

C. Finally, false prophets lift up the “goodness” of evil.

They teach that evil can actually be GOOD. In Thyatira Jezebel probably said things like this, *“You need to make a living and God doesn’t expect you to starve. Don’t be worried. God has told me it’s alright. It’s okay to go and be a part of the guilds and participate in the immoral and idolatrous worship that occurs in their meetings after all we live by grace and are not under the law anymore.”*

The Jezebels of our day do the same thing. They teach that what God’s laws say is evil---is really not. For example, many say that His loving laws concerning sex and marriage are outdated---that sex itself is a social construct. Anyone with any sense can clearly see sex is a God-construct. He designed it to work one way.

Putin is a good example of a “Jezebel” in our day and age because he says that conquering Ukraine is not really evil, but good. Bombing cities is for the GOOD of the people who live there. He said, *“I have absolutely no bad feelings toward the people of Ukraine.”* He says he’s their friend, well if you have friends like Putin...who needs ENEMIES!

Paul warned the Ephesians about these kinds of false teaching in Acts 20:29-30 when he said, ***“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!”***

False prophets tend to rationalize away the truth such that they compromise their convictions and end up doing things that they know are wrong—things they know they shouldn’t do. And truth be told, we are all very good at rationalizing away behavior we know is not good. In fact, let me ask—where have you been rationalizing lately? What sin are you tempted to rationalize away right now?

Listen friends! I’m not kidding here. Jezebel’s voice is not silent in the 21st century any more than it was in the 1st. You can count on the evil one whispering things like this to you:

“You’re unhappy in this marriage and God doesn’t want you to be unhappy. It would be unbearable for you to go through life being unhappy so you better leave.”

The Jezebels of today will say, *“You better not obey God fully in this situation. You better not stand up for what you really believe. Just go with the flow.”*

Or... *“You better not give generously---God doesn’t expect you to tithe in these economic times---so don’t because if you do, you may not be able to get those things you want. I mean need.”*

You can count on that voice putting thoughts like THIS in your head, *“Oh, you may shade the truth sometimes, but there are people who are much bigger liars than you are. They’re the ones with the real problem.”*

Friends, some of you may be THIS CLOSE to a spiritual compromise that will be a disaster---one that is going to end in judgement---and if that applies to you listen to Jesus and repent.

Now, I know that the judgement Jesus says is coming in His letter—I know it sounds hard---and we could debate all morning whether He meant the LITERAL death of this woman’s children or the SPIRITUAL death of those who embraced her teachings---like a child would those of a parent but the clear truth here that we must not miss is that there is ALWAYS a painful consequence to sin. Sin may feel good for a little while—but it HURTS for a LONG TIME...so if you’re rationalizing your way into compromise then HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS!

And if you need further motivation then hear this—there is PAIN involved in sin—but JOY comes from obedience. To those of us who follow His leading Jesus promises authority over the nations. In other words, He’ll use us to turn the world upside down! PLUS—He’ll give us the Morning Star—which is Jesus Himself. If we repent---if we turn from our sin and turn toward God we’ll have intimate fellowship with Jesus for all eternity.

LET US PRAY