

The Sin-Consuming Savior and Judge

Revelation 2:18–29

What have we seen in each of the churches about the culture they exist in? [Hostile toward God's people.] Persecution is part and parcel of Christian life in a dark, rebellious, idolatrous world. All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:12) We are called to be different; we are not to look like the world. And the world will hate us for that.

But what have we seen about the ultimate outcome for the people of God? [Conquerors, Overcomers]. Jesus is in the midst of the churches. He sees. He shepherds. He saves. And he is the living King of Kings who is soon returning.

What is the command Jesus gives to 5 of the 7 churches? [Repent] We see today the call to repent in what seems like so obvious a sin that we are almost left scratching our heads about how they got there? But even in Thyatira, the call to repent rather than a pronouncement of final judgment puts the Lord's grace and mercy on display. And he delights to show his mercy and grace.

Revelation 2:18–29 — 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.

¹⁹ “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. 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. ²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

²² 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, ²³ and I will strike her children dead. 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.

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.

PRAY —

The Church at Thyatira

Of the seven, Thyatira is the smallest city, but it gets the longest letter. It is not a prominent city. Because of its location in a broad valley it was easy to attack and difficult to defend. As it was conquered by one king after another it became a very multi-cultural city. It was a melting pot of idols, though the pagan god Tyrimnos was considered the guardian of city. He was the patron deity of the guilds. And Thyatira had lots of guilds. Think of them as the forerunners of unions. It had a textile industry run by skilled “woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers” — the town was known for its purple die that was associated with particular elements of the environment there.

Lydia, the seller of purple in **Acts 16** was from Thyatira. There were “tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths.”¹

We begin to get some insight in the corruption the church had fallen into because of the guild culture in the town. Each trades was governed by a guild, and Thyatira was a closed union town. In order to make a living there you had to be a member of a trade guild. The guilds reflected the pagan culture; members were expected to participate in religious activities honoring different false gods. Imagine being required to attend a dinner for your job; if you didn't go, you would be terminated. As the guilds engaged in various idol worship, if you didn't participate you lost your capacity to make a living.

It is in this difficult situation that Jesus addresses his church. As he does in each of the churches, he first orients them away from their immediate difficulties to his eternal glory. Let's take a lesson from this consistent structure to churches that are each in a hard place. When things are hard, look to the King. In doing so we are oriented to who and what endures forever. This puts whatever challenges we are dealing with in perspective — they are not permanent. That isn't to say immediate circumstances can't be painful or overwhelming... it just reminds us that things here are passing away, but Jesus lives forever; he is the conquering King, and he is our Savior and Shepherd

Orientation to the Son of God — v. 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.’ The opening descriptions in each letter are rooted in chapter 1, and are important keys for understanding the way out of the difficulty that each church faces. So let's be oriented to Jesus before we get into the conditions in the church.

¹ W M Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, p. 239

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Jesus is the son of God. This is a repudiation of Tyrimnos, who was said to be the son of Zeus, the top pagan deity. The Roman emperor also claimed to be the son of Zeus. Jesus clarifies who God's son is. Jesus is; not the false deities. Jesus's self-description aligns closely with the vision Daniel saw in **Daniel 10**. His eyes are like a flame of fire; his feet are like burnished or refined bronze. In Daniel's vision he calls him the Son of Man. Daniel prophetically looks forward to Christ in his humanity, when he came in human form. Here this same Jesus, as the eternal Son of God, is seen in his divine nature, and focuses on his capacity to see and judge with perfect wisdom and understanding.

His eyes of fire penetrate and expose every dark secret. **V. 23** further says he **searches mind and heart**—nothing is hidden from him—and he gives to each according to their works. This terrifying truth cuts both ways. He knows everything—every sin, every motive, every evil thought and deed. But his grace on display, too, isn't it? Because he knew what he was getting he came to redeem and purchase us by his blood. There will never be a time when Jesus tries to return us saying, "He wasn't all that he presented himself to be; he has a lot of hidden sins." Or, "She wasn't as moral and upright as I thought, so I want my redemption back." No. He knows everything you have done, and everything you will ever do and saved you—**not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy**, as you studied last week in **Titus 3**.

His feet symbolize strength and splendor. They are feet that tread the fury of the winepress of God Almighty's wrath in **Revelation 19**. Robert Bratcher wrote, "With such eyes the Son of God can see into the most distant and darkest places; with such feet he can stamp out all opposition to his rule."²

Behold your God. He is perfect in knowledge and wisdom and power; and he is the conquering, sin-consuming Savior and King. As he does in each church, he tells them their true condition, commending them for the good they are doing, and calling them to repentance for their sin.

Commendation — v. 19 — 'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. Jesus sees bad and good.

You are growing in love! This is a contrast to Ephesus that had become loveless toward both God and man in their intellectual pursuit of doctrinal integrity. But Thyatira loved people at the beginning, and now they love even more! Their faith was likewise growing. These new-heart motivations

² Robert Bratcher and Howard A. Hattan, *A Handbook on The Revelation to John*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1993.

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produced missional acts, service and outreach, care for one another, patient endurance... these good works were increasing as they flowed from increasing love and faith.

This is a good check for us. Jesus commends them; they haven't become stagnant or weary. What about us? We loved God and loved each other and sought to love and serve our community in the early days — prayer walking, reaching out, caring for those who were not even part of us. Have we grown in our love and faith and service, or have we become tired or distracted with other things? Thyatira has some massive sin issues to deal with, but failure to love is not one of them. Let's ask the Lord to strengthen us in faith, grow us in love, equip us for greater service, overcome our distractions or selfish inclinations so that if he were to come he would say, "You started in love and faith; you've continued to grow in love and faith so that you serve more, you are more missional than ever.

While that is a great report so far, there are huge sin issues that must be addressed. In Ephesus, doctrinal fidelity was not a substitute for love. In Thyatira, love is not a substitute for doctrinal fidelity. The river of love can be life-giving when it is hemmed in by the banks and boundaries of God's righteous decrees and God's holy character. But when boundaries are breached, rivers become agents of destruction rather than sustainers of life. Because Thyatira had lost orientation to the commands and truths in God's word, they were seduced by the world — specifically by a woman who had become influential in the fellowship and they were embracing death and destruction.

Seduction — v. 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.

Who is Jezebel? First, I think the name is symbolic of the "original" Jezebel in 1st and 2nd Kings. She was the daughter of the pagan king of Sidon who married the wicked King Ahab. Indeed, she greatly increased his capacity for wickedness. When she married Ahab, she brought her all her idolatrous Baal worship with her and seduced Israel to all manner of evil. You will recall Elijah's encounter with 800 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Where did those prophets come from? Jezebel set them up, murdering God's prophets along the way. Worship of Baal was not only idolatrous, as though that weren't enough, but it was wicked and evil on multiple other levels. It involved sexual immorality in worship. As bad as sexual sin is in our day, it's hard to imagine how much worse it was then, and in the 1st Century, as evil acts were done publicly and crowds of people participated together. Jezebel,

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therefore, became the catch phrase for false teachers who seduced God's people to turn from the worship of Yahweh to acts of unspeakable evil and false gods.

Similarly in Thyatira an influential woman was being tolerated right down the middle of the life and leadership of the church. This is incredibly alarming. Was she teaching a Sunday School class, or was she simply a magnetic personality who accumulated a following of people who listened to her? We don't know for sure, but we do know that she was unchecked in the church — they tolerated her.

We've been studying through Titus in our groups.

What was Titus's assignment? [appoint elders, teach doctrine]

What were the elders to do with all authority? [teach, encourage, rebuke with all authority]

This woman was allowed to continue her evil influence unhindered. What is a reasonable question we should be asking about the church in Thyatira? [Where were the elders?]

Spiritual leadership that is tethered to the Word of God and is doctrinally robust saves the sheep from wolves who would destroy them. Jesus does not specifically address their pastors and elders, but we can deduce some things that have contemporary application for us. They may have been loving, relational, friendly guys, but they were disoriented to God's word, or negligent in their of God's people — or probably both. This feels like theologically liberal churches in our day who have embraced a social Gospel that cares for physical and emotional needs but ignores God's standard of holiness and the need to be saved from sin and God's wrath against sin. Our greatest need is not food but forgiveness. It is a false dichotomy to separate the two. What does it prophesy a man to be warm and well-fed, only to end in a sinner's Hell as a result of not ever humbling him before Christ? What does it prophesy a man to gain the whole world yet lose his soul?

Elders and the church let this woman go unchecked in her seduction, enticing God's people to engage in gross immorality, perhaps saying something like, "Well, it's required by your job if you want to stay in the guild. God understands that, so don't worry about it." But that is not what God has said. What is the command of God's word? How about this pithy correction: **Flee sexual immorality.** (1 Corinthians 6:18) Or 1 Corinthians 10:14 — **Flee from idolatry.** Or the myriad references condemning in the Old Testament that referenced and often linked sexual sin and idolatry. God's people were redeemed and saved from sin and the wrath that is coming on the world for his purposes. They are to look like Jesus.

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Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. (Romans 12:2a) He created us for his glory. **1 Peter 2:9 — But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.** We are called out of darkness, Thyatira. **How can we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:2)** Jesus takes this seriously. Do not believe those who say love is love and God understands. God is love, and his standard is the only one that matters.

So two things, quickly, as Jesus judges their sin.

As God dealt with Jezebel in a decisive and frightful way in 2 Kings, he will deal with this 1st Century remake of Jezebel in a severe way. In the Old Testament Jezebel was killed by being thrown out of a window and then dogs ate her body. In Thyatira, if she will not repent, she will be cast on a sickbed. God is going to send disease on her. God is going to undertake to make her, and those who participate in sexual immorality with her, to suffer. He is going to strike her children dead. It is a frightful judgment. "God would never do that!" Have you read this book from the beginning? "Well, that's the God of the Old Testament." Are there two Gods? Or is there one holy, sin-hating God? He has infinite resources to punish the unrepentant sinner.

God's punishment is just, and fits the offense. His just and righteous judgment against sin will be done in such a way that all the churches will know that He who is holy sees and knows everything. It is laid bare before his holy sight. But there is a stunning word of grace near the end of v. 22. Judgment is coming **unless**. "I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works."

What a gracious call: Repent! Consider the heinousness of their sin, its offense to God.

In light of that, consider the breathtaking kindness of God who knows everything, our thoughts and affections, our lusts and longings... He knows, and yet he purchased us. He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy. (Titus 3). He knew what we were, he knows what we will be. He calls us to return to him; to turn from worldliness to Christlikeness. And he delights to put his mercy on display as we return to him.

You recall, I trust, the father's response to the prodigal son when he returned. The son rightly admitted all his sin, willing to be treated like a servant if he could just be home. And what did the

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father do? Get a robe! Kill the fatted calf! My son has come home! Look at what the state of both repentant sinner, and the saint who have not embraced this sin and have held fast, as he Jesus commanded:

v. 26 — 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.

You may recognize some of that language. It is from Psalm 2, the Messianic Psalm at the front of the Psalter that tells of the Jesus' ultimate rule and reign. For those who walk with Christ in faith and repentance — who conquer and overcome — as he reigns in exaltation over all the nations, his children rule and reign with him. Behold what manner of love and forgiveness and reconciliation and freedom from condemnation the Lord has given us, that we should be sons of God and joint heirs with him! As he reigns, we will reign with him. Hold fast to what you have until he comes!

Hold fast! Look away from yourself and circumstance to Jesus. Wait on the Lord who delivers. They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. He has never lost one the Father has given him.

The opportunity for repentance is not endless. The gracious call to return to him is limited. But today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Now is the accepted time. Your glad assignment is to hear and respond to him in faith, in the multitude of his mercies today.

PRAY — Lord, give new hearts. Give repentance. May be mourn over our sin and rejoice in the multitude of your mercies.