

Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb
That Woman Jezebel
Revelation 2:18-29

Text:

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 as your works deserve. 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.’

Introduction:

One of the age-old questions that Christians have grappled with through the centuries is how much of the culture can we have? When is a Christian supposed to be counter-cultural? When is Christianity supposed to be anti-cultural?

When the culture deeply connects social, economic, civil and religious elements, these questions become all the more pressing. When does one’s job get in the way of his Christianity? And when it does get in the way, what do you do?

- Can a Christian make a good pharmacist? Will he sell the newly approved “morning after pill”? Does that make him an accomplice to murder? Should a Christian pharmacist even grapple with that question or is it simply his job?
- Can a Christian make a good lawyer where manipulating facts and the timing of the truth is part of the policy? And when the truth gets in the way of winning a case, what should a Christian do? Should they even bother with this question or is it simply their job?
- Can a Christian make a good salesman where honesty does not always convince the buyer? What should one do when the boss encourages them to over-sell or exaggerate the outcome of the product so as to make it attractive? Should they even see this as a dilemma or just do their job?

- Can a Christian make a good soldier where loving one's enemy is the command of Christ? What should a soldier do when he is trained and encouraged to fight with rage toward the vilified enemy – hate the Iraqi terrorists? Should he just do his job or wrestle with this dilemma?
- Can a Christian be an effective politician when compromise is the only way to get a bill passed? Is there a compromise for everything or should they just do their job?
- What about a public school teacher where your hands have been tied with regard to what you can and cannot say from your personal convictions?

How does your Christianity bring conflict into your profession? In what ways are you tempted to cut corners and compromise the truth so as to get ahead and increase the bottom line?

You see, when the culture not only condones non-Christian behavior in order to achieve success in the business climate, but also expects it, what does a Christian do? Should a Christian stay true to his principles and risk the loss of a job or should they conform to the culture's expectations? Now I rejoice that for the vast majority of my audience, the answer to that question is a no-brainer! But such is not the case for the vast majority of evangelicals in America.

Let's take our hypotheticals to another level. What happens for the follower of Christ when not just the workplace is affected but the social climate is affected? What happens when you refuse to participate in the office parties and banquets? What happens when you refuse to participate in the city festivals? What happens when the participation in social events calls into question your Christian morals and puts at risk your entire livelihood?

Every year Sherwin Williams hosts an annual conference for all of its management officials. They throw a huge party and Ryan Hawk is expected to go. The alcohol flows freely; men are away from their families and go together to support local strip-clubs and the like. Every year State Farm hosts an annual convention for all of its agents. They throw a huge party that includes the renting of stadiums like Soldier Field in Chicago and their employees are expected to go and Dan Zempel goes. My question is this: what happens when not only your presence is required but so is your participation – in everything. And what would happen if by "everything" I meant that Sherwin Williams or State Farm Insurance supplied the alcohol and the women and men for sexual pleasure? I mean what would happen if your very employment in the company was tied to your participation in such revelry? I mean what if your residence status in the town was tied to such social affairs? Can you imagine?

Is that hard to imagine? That is precisely what was going on in Thyatira.

Before we move forward though, wrestle with these questions:

- Do you think that there are Christians employed in State Farm or Sherwin Williams (and I only reference these two because of the clear stories I have from Dan and Ryan) who wrestle immensely with questions of conformity and participation because they know it will affect their status in the company and their status in the social climate?
- Do you think that there are Christians in "Fortune 500" American who wrestle with questions of morality and ethics because they know it will affect their bottom line?
- Do you think that there are churches and preachers in America who are compounding the problem by muddying the waters as they preach a compromised gospel that encourages wealth and success in the world?

- Do you think?

Let me tell you about Thyatira.

Thyatira was the least known, least remarkable, and least important of the seven cities to receive a letter from the Lord. It had no significant military, political, or administrative responsibilities, and if it is to be noted for anything it is its commercial enterprises. It was a center for manufacturing and marketing and its most distinguishing characteristic was the large number of trade guilds that flourished there, the existence of which posed a special problem for Christians. We'll come to that in a minute.

The two most prominent trades were the practice of dying materials and bronze work. You might recall that Lydia, the seller of purple, mentioned in Acts 16, came from Thyatira. She would have been a member of the dye guild.

It is probably due to the bronze work that flourished in the town that Jesus addresses himself as the one having feet burnished with bronze. That would have struck a chord with the residents.

The church in Thyatira was a flourishing church. That is, they were making progress. They were a church that was growing. Notice how Jesus describes their admirable works in v. 19: "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first." It is this last phrase, "your latter works exceed the first" which stands out. Jesus says, "Your works of late are better than those earlier. You are progressing." This is admirable.

In other words, the church in Thyatira was a growing church, not so much in terms of size as in Christ-like qualities. They had learned that the Christian life is one of growth, progress, development, and spiritual increase. Merely maintaining the moral status quo, whether individually or corporately, is inadequate. Thus whereas Ephesus was backsliding, Thyatira was moving forward. We may therefore add this as another quality of the church that Jesus approves: to the doctrinal orthodoxy of Ephesus, the suffering for righteousness' sake of Smyrna, the love of Pergamum, we now add the growth and development of Thyatira.

Oh that we would be a church that makes spiritual progress in the areas of love, service, faith and perseverance!

It is tragic, however, after having read of the splendid qualities in Thyatira, to read farther and discover that *moral compromise* was present in the church. As Stott said,

"In that fair field a poisonous weed was being allowed to luxuriate. In that healthy body a malignant cancer had begun to form. An enemy was being harboured in the midst of the fellowship" (71).

Here we see the similarity between Thyatira and Pergamum and their joint dissimilarity with Ephesus. The Ephesians could not bear the presence of falsehood and took no uncertain steps in ridding the cancerous error from their assembly. But as noted earlier, it was done at the expense of love. Not so with Thyatira. While abounding in love they had lost their sensitivity to error and had compromised the glorious truths of both doctrinal and moral uprightness. The exact nature of the heresy in Thyatira was wrapped up in the person and practices of one whom Jesus calls "*Jezebel*."

First of all, I think it is likely that Jesus is referencing a real woman in the church, but it is unlikely that her real name was Jezebel. He never moves away from using second person singular and feminine pronouns. In other words, he does not move from the similarity to an individual to a group like he did with Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Whatever this woman was doing, she simply

bore a resemblance to that Jezebel in the OT. Do you remember Jezebel? She is one of the most infamous women of all time. Not many parents have named their daughters Jezebel down through history, have they?

According to 1 Kings 16:31, Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, who married Ahab, king of Israel. Largely because of her influence in seeking to combine the worship of Yahweh with the worship of Baal, it is said of her husband that he “did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” (1 Kings 16:33). Jezebel was responsible for the killing of Naboth and confiscation of his vineyard for her husband (1 Kings 21:1-6). She sought the death of all the prophets of Israel (1 Kings 18:4; 2 Kings 9) and even came close to killing Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-3).

Her own death is one of the most graphic Bible stories to stick in my head as a young boy in S.S. It came as a result of being thrown from a window where she was then trampled by a horse. And when an attempt was made to recover her body for burial, it was discovered that the only thing left was her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands. According to 2 Kings 9:36-37, dogs had eaten her flesh, in fulfillment of a prophetic word from Elijah:

“And he said, ‘This is the word of the Lord, which He spoke by His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, “In the property of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung on the face of the field in the property of Jezreel, so they cannot say, “This is Jezebel.”””

Although the first Jezebel had been dead for over 1,000 years, her spirit had, as it were, found new life in this woman of Thyatira! But what did she advocate that led to her being labeled with this horrid name?

The second thing I want you to notice is that the sexual immorality may or may not be literal. It is likely not literal. In other words, she was not having immoral relations with people in the church but her teaching as a prophetess (cf. v.20) was causing many to commit spiritual whoredom. Notice v.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...” You see, it is likely that her teaching was seducing true bondservants of Christ (cf. v.20) to commit spiritual adultery by succumbing to these “deep teachings,” so called.

You can imagine how this happens, can't you? I asked you earlier if American Christians struggle with the balance between cultural participation and loyalty to Christian virtue. I also asked you if there are preachers who compound the matter by preaching a false gospel of material prosperity in this age. Can you imagine if a prophetess arose in your church who claimed to have received a deep teaching from God – that was really from Satan, as Jesus makes plain? We know enough of the history of these trade guilds to piece together what this woman Jezebel may have done.

It is likely that she had exploited the commercial prosperity of Thyatira to justify and to subsidize her immorality and that of her followers. Leon Morris explains:

“The strong trade guilds in this city would have made it very difficult for any Christian to earn his living without belonging to a guild. But membership involved attendance at guild banquets, and this in turn meant eating meat which had first been sacrificed to an idol. . . . That these meals all too readily degenerated into sexual looseness made matters worse. But we can understand that some Christians would welcome a heresy of this type. It enabled them to maintain a Christian profession while countenancing and even engaging in immoral heathen revels” (71).

So the immorality they committed was first and foremost not sexual (though possible), but spiritual. Do you recall what John has written elsewhere? “Love not the world neither the things in the world...” (1 John 2:15). Or recall James harsh words in James 4:4: “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” Adulterous people are people who want what this world has to offer more than they want what Christ has to offer. And how comforting and convenient it is when you can have a spiritual teacher who helps you justify your material whoredom.

Now notice that the complaint of the Lord is in the degree of toleration that the church has for such a woman and her unhealthy justification for materialism. It is clear that most in the church had not adopted her teaching but some had slept with her mindset and had even propagated her following. She has lovers and children in the community.

I have no desire to be contentious; but I have every desire to contend for the truth. I think that American evangelicalism is packed with churches who tolerate and propagate this kind of materialistic whoredom when it embraces the false gospel of Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, and Joel Osteen? That may make you uncomfortable that I would single them out. So let me give you the bottom-line question. If you listen to their gospel long and hard enough, what does one receive when they come to Christ? Their answer is you receive health, wealth and prosperity – “your best life now.” Is that true?

Church that kind of gospel is completely contrary to the experience and the teaching these seven churches received from Jesus. Poor old Antipas in Pergamum was martyred for his faith – where was the health, wealth and prosperity there? Jesus encourages Smyrna to be faithful unto death? How Joel Osteen offer counsel? Now Jesus tells Thyatira: “Hold fast what you have until I come” (v.25). Do hear what that implies? Your best life is yet to come. This life may be painful and impoverished should your Christian virtues get you kicked out of the trade guilds and you find yourself unemployed. Hold fast anyway.

When Jesus comes, then you will succeed and rule the nations (cf. vv.26-27). Isn’t that great? Those Christians that persevere to the end will finally prosper? Oh, But be careful here, Christian, lest you fall into a more pious form or idolatry.

Listen! If you can’t wait for heaven because it is in heaven that you will finally get your dream home – your mansion, you are an idolater. If you can’t wait for heaven because you will finally have access to streets of gold – you are an idolater. If you can’t wait for heaven because of all the endless banquet tables of the finest foods you can’t afford now – you are an idolater. Or, and I tread lightly, if you can’t wait for heaven because you will have a great family reunion with those who have gone before – you are an idolater.

Here is why: Any kind of preaching or any kind of belief that uses God or Christ or the cross as a means to some other end is a false gospel. The only end to the true gospel is that you finally get God – not a mansion, not gold, not health, not food, not family! You get God! God is the end of the journey toward heaven. I always say to people, it will be 10,000,000 years before you even think about looking around at the scenery in heaven because you cannot take your eyes off of God.

That means that is God is the end of the earthly journey toward heaven, then God must be the end of all earthly pursuits in this life as well. The question is never, “How can God in Christ get me wealth in this life?” That is idolatry! That means that you love money more than you love Christ. The question is never, “How can God in Christ get me health? That is idolatry! That means you love this life more than you love Christ. It is for this reason alone – and this reason alone is

sufficient enough – for me to say, Church, do not tolerate Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, and the like! They may lead you to spiritual whoredom like a Jezebel! The mark of holiness and spiritual success for these men is whether or not you have a DC-10.

Now notice v.28 and I will show you I am on the right track. Jesus says to the overcomers, “And I will give you the morning star.” What does he mean? What is the morning star?

Look at 22:12-16

At the end of it all, what you get in return for a life of faithfulness is Jesus himself!

And if that doesn't float your bubble and energize your emotions – you are not in love with Christ. Stop calling yourself a Christian and go make money!