

Children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Christian school for lunch, and at the head of the serving table was a bunch of apples, with a note from the teacher. The note read, "Take only one, God is watching." At the other end of the serving table was a large stack of chocolate chip cookies with a note quickly written by one of the students. It read: "Take all the cookies you want; God is watching the apples."

In some respects, members in our next church in **Revelation** may have had the same idea, thinking that God's attention was directed elsewhere – to the bigger churches and the larger cities – He's watching the apples, not the cookies, but that was not the case as they would discover in their letter from the Lord.

We are continuing our study of these letters to seven real churches in Asia Minor, and we have already looked at the first three – the church in Ephesus, which was an *unloving church*, the church in Smyrna which was a *suffering church*, and the church in Pergamum which was a *compromising church*. This morning we will be looking at the fourth church on this postal route – the church in Thyatira, and as we have done in the past, before we take a look at this church, let's first take a look at the city.

Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities, a town situated in the shadows of its larger neighbors Pergamum and Sardis. It was a military town as it housed a Roman garrison and it could also be described as a blue-collar town, a working man's town due to the manufacturing and trade industry that was predominate there. The manufacturing of textiles, such as woolen goods, appears to have been a booming business in Thyatira, as well as their metal working industry, but they were most known for their dye-making. They were famous for producing the much sought-after purple dye – which was a color worn by the Roman elite. **Do you remember Lydia in Acts 16?** She was on a business trip in Philippi, a trader of purple fabric, and she came from Thyatira. If you recall, Lydia was one of the Apostle Paul's first converts when he visited Philippi on his second missionary journey.

Now as a blue-collar town, Thyatira was also known for its many trade guilds. These guilds were somewhat similar to the powerful trade unions in our own country, and it was very difficult for a worker to make a living unless they were members in one of these trade guilds, and unfortunately, these guilds were linked to the worship of pagan gods – and let me explain.

Each trade guild had its own particular pagan god, a "guardian god" if you will, and as a member of a trade guild, you would be expected to attend all its meetings

and fully participate in all its activities. So, at these mandatory functions, which were likely held in a pagan temple, members would spend a little time paying tribute to the guardian god of their guild – making some type of sacrifice, they would spend a little time taking care of guild business, and they would spend a lot of time drinking and partying, which included sharing common meals sacrificed to their guardian god and engaging in sexual immorality.

So, as you might imagine, the members of the church in Thyatira had a problem. If you wanted to get a job in the city, you had to belong to a trade guild and take part in its functions. It was an all or nothing deal. You couldn't say, *"I need a job and I'll join the guild, but I don't want to take part in the idol worship and the parties,"* because that wouldn't fly in Thyatira, so the Christians were torn between employment, which meant having to be part of a guild, and on the other hand staying faithful to the Lord and His righteous standards, and consequently giving up all hope of making a living in the city. So, the Christians were faced with a real dilemma in Thyatira, and as you might imagine, it impacted their small church.

As I said earlier, Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities, but this small church in this small city would receive the longest letter from the Lord. That's both encouraging and at the same time sobering, as it reminds us that small churches in small places really do matter to God – we matter to God, but it also suggests that big trouble can also occur in small places which require God's attention. Yes, God is watching the apples, but He's also watching the chocolate chip cookies as well. So, let's look at this letter beginning with **verse 18**. Jesus says,

“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:

In this verse, Jesus says something about Himself that He does not say anywhere else in the book of Revelation. He identifies Himself as the **“Son of God”** referring to His deity. In Jewish thought, to be the son of a person meant you had the same nature of that person. So, the Son of God – Jesus, has the same divine nature, the same holy nature, and the same righteous nature of God, and pointing out this truth may have been necessary to address the situation in this church.

We are told the Lord's eyes are **like a flame of fire and His feet like burnished bronze**. This symbolic image of flaming eyes speaks to the Lord's ability to see everything and know everything. Nothing is hidden from Him. The Lord looks on the inside – seeing what does not appear on the outside. In regards to His feet of bronze, which was the hardest metal at the time, this likely speaks to His unlimited

power and His authority to judge, so based on the Lord's serious and somewhat fearful introduction to this church, it would seem that one of those "Aah oh" moments is coming next. Jesus continues and says in **verse 19**,

'I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.'

Jesus said, *"I know what you are doing, I see your deeds, I see the love and the faith you have, I see your service and your patience, and I see that your deeds are growing."*

In light of His serious and fearful introduction, we might not have expected these words from Jesus, but here they are. This church actually had works of love and service. They showed care, and interest, and concern for others – unlike the church in Ephesus that was unloving. Jesus gave them an A+ in their deeds to others. Their ministry was growing – growing in faith, growing in love, growing in hope, and that growth was seen in the way they worshiped and served and reached out to others. Jesus even commended them for their faith – they sincerely trusted in Him.

These are nice, hardworking, faithful, and loving people. This sounds like an ideal church, and on top of that, it does not appear this church was being persecuted by the Jews or the Romans. It seems they were completely left alone – **so, what could have prompted the Lord's imagery of His fiery eyes and His feet of bronze?** Well, let's find out. Look at **verses 20 and 21**.

²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality.

Despite the faithfulness, and the love, and the ministry of many in this church, Jesus identified two other groups of people in this seemingly fractured church – those engaged in wickedness and those who tolerated the wickedness and looked the other way.

Jesus pointed out that those engaged in the wickedness were corrupted by a woman symbolically named "**Jezebel**." We know that name from the Old Testament, **don't we?** If you recall, Jezebel was an evil woman mentioned in **1st and 2nd Kings**. She was married to Ahab, who was a wicked king of Israel – likely the worst king Israel ever had. Yes, Ahab was the king, but it was Jezebel who seemed to pull the strings, especially when it came to matters related to their

religious policy. Jezebel was devoted to the Canaanite religion of Baal worship. The Canaanites worshiped Baal as their sun god, their storm god, and also as their fertility god, and as such, sexual immorality was at the root of their pagan rituals.

When Jezebel became queen, she first turned the heart of the king, then she turned the hearts of Israel to the worship of Baal on a national scale. It was Jezebel who persuaded her husband to build an altar in Samaria dedicated to Baal. In addition, it was Jezebel who murdered the prophets of God, in fact, she tried to kill the prophet Elijah after he challenged 450 of her pagan priests on Mt. Carmel and then he goes Samson on them and slaughtered them with the sword (**1 Kings 18-19**).

So, that's the Jezebel in the Old Testament, and it appears that we have a type of Jezebel in this church in Thyatira, **but how could such a woman come to power?** Well, we are told she called herself a **prophetess** – meaning she claimed to hear and speak for God. Just like the first Jezebel, this woman was apparently clever and persuasive, and she also knew what strings to pull to get her way.

This Jezebel had a reputation for teaching, and if we drop down to **verse 24**, we get a clue about her teaching, where Jesus describes it as **the deep things of Satan**. People love a mystery. People love secrets, and it seems this Jezebel presented her teaching as being hidden from normal Christians. Just like those in cults, she claimed to possess the deep secrets, the unknown truths, to have special insight into the spiritual world which others did not have, and that was likely what made her attractive to others and enticed her followers away from the “simple” gospel. She claimed to be God's prophet, when in fact, she spoke for Satan.

This Jezebel became an influential leader – deliberately encouraging Christians to disregard God's Word and their own conscience and **to commit acts of immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols**. In context, it seems that this woman corrupted many in the church to go ahead and participate in the activities of the trade guilds to protect their livelihoods.

This Jezebel was saying, in effect, *“It's alright to go and be a part of the trade guilds and participate in their pagan worship and in their immoral activities. Don't worry about it, after all, you need to make a living. God has told me it's alright because what you do with your body has no impact on your soul. You can take part in their activities and still be a good Christian.”*

In other words, you can live like the devil from Monday to Saturday, but just make sure you're in church on Sunday and it will be okay.

Her teaching was dead wrong, it was deceptive, it was from the devil, and for some in this church – it was exactly what they wanted to hear. *“Do what you want, when you want, and with whom you want – it’s all good with God. You can have your cake and your ice cream too.”*

Obviously, this was a problem in the church, but it wasn’t the only problem in this church. There were people in this church who saw the wickedness for what it was, who knew the teaching of this Jezebel was sinful, who understood that God is holy and righteous, and yet, they chose to look the other way. They decided to stay in their own lane, if you will, and not get involved in another person’s business. Their motto was: *“If you want to come to church and believe what you want and do what you want, that’s not our concern.”*

Boy, that’s relevant in the here and now, **isn’t it?** We live in a culture where biblical doctrine is considered outdated and almost meaningless, and sinful activities are tolerated and not called out for what they truly are. I mean – God forbid we point out that sin is actually sin, and to really go overboard, let’s not mention the wages of sin and the real existence of hell, because if we do, we will be labelled as intolerant, hateful, and judgmental.

Let’s talk about that for a moment, because I want to clarify something that may be confusing. Jesus told us in **Matthew 7:1**,

“Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”

This is a very misunderstood and often misused verse – a verse used by well-meaning Christians as a license to turn the other way and to not get involved. From this verse, some have taken it to mean that we are not to engage in any type of evaluation of others, suggesting we cannot say that a person’s behavior is wrong – but that’s not right, for there are many passages in the Bible that tell us otherwise. For example, just a few verses later Jesus tells us you will know a tree by its fruit and how can you do that without some type of meaningful evaluation.

So, then what is Jesus saying here? In **Matthew 7:1**, that Greek word for **judge** is *“krino”* and in context, it speaks of someone who sits in judgment to condemn, and when we judge in this way, we are in effect, putting on the robe, sitting in the judge’s seat, taking the gavel, and rendering condemnation according to our own standards of what is right and what is wrong, and Jesus says we can’t do that, especially because our own standards tend to be self-centered and hypocritical.

When I was a probation and parole officer and later a supervisor, I interacted with many individuals who disagreed with me because they wanted the freedom to do what they wanted to do, when they wanted to do it, and often times I would pull out their case file and we would review their original sentence given to them by the judge. In their sentence from the judge, my role was defined, and their conditions of supervision were clearly spelled out. It was the judge who said what they could do and what they could not do. It was the judge who determined what was right and wrong for them. It was the judge who drew a line in the sand that they could not cross without consequences. It was the judge who did that, not me. My role was to evaluate, to motivate, to confront if necessary, and to enforce the judge's sentence.

In the same way, it is God who is the righteous Judge and it is He who determines what is sinful and what is not, and God has explained it in His Word. Christians are not being judgmental if they are simply pointing out, in love, what God has already said to them. They are His standards of right and wrong, and it is He who has drawn the doctrinal and moral line in the sand – not you and me. If God has called something sin – then it is sin and we need to lovingly call it out and confront it if necessary. It is never wrong to call wrong, what God calls wrong, but it needs to be done in the right way – in the right spirit. That's what Jesus is saying in **Matthew 7**.

For some in the church in Thyatira, they recognized the sin of this Jezebel and her followers, but they would not call it out, and they would not confront it. Instead, they tolerated the sin and looked the other way, and that was a problem in this fractured congregation. There were some who were faithful, there were some who were engaged in wickedness, and there were some who looked the other way and did not want to get involved.

Well, Jesus has something to say about all of this beginning with **verse 22**.

²² Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.

²³ And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. ²⁴ But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you.

We are told that because this woman refused to repent, she would suffer severely – her punishment would fit her crime. She used her bed to commit adultery, likely both physically and spiritually, and she would now be condemned to affliction in her bed, which some interpret as her death. Her children – those who followed her teaching and were unwilling to repent, they too would find punishment and death because they ignored God’s Word. Jesus said the punishment would be so dramatic, that **all the churches** would know the Lord **searches the minds and hearts**, He turns over every stone, He shines a bright light in the darkest of closets, and He will make no mistake when He renders His judgment.

This is some serious stuff coming from Jesus. If you recall, when we first dived into this book, I mentioned we would see Jesus in a different light compared to His earthly ministry. We might think of Jesus as the Lamb of God, but as we make our way through this book, He is also portrayed as a ferocious Lion, and He’s no joke.

Now, in these last few verses, Jesus has something to say to the faithful in this church. Beginning with **verse 25**, He says,

²⁵ Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. ²⁶ He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; ²⁷ and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also 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.’

Jesus has nothing negative to say about the faithful, rather He encourages them to hold fast, and He gives them two promises.

Referring to **Psalm 2**, Jesus says that He will give His true followers **authority over the nations**. This clearly refers to the Millennial Kingdom – the 1000-year reign where Christ sets up His earthly kingdom after His return to the earth. Jesus will have the ultimate authority over all nations, and here Jesus says that His followers will share in His rule. We will reign with Him just like a shepherd who cares for their flock.

A second reward for the overcomer is to receive **the morning star**. Morning stars appear only when night is over and a new day is dawning. We don’t get an explanation of this; however, a key for interpreting this reference might be **Revelation 22:16**, where Christ is called the Bright Morning Star. This second reward could be fellowship with Christ Himself – the greatest reward of all.

So, what can we take from this church in Thyatira? There are a couple of things.

First, be careful of who you listen to, and that goes for me as well. Just because someone calls themselves a preacher or a teacher, just because they pastor a church – even a mega-church, just because they have a T.V. show, just because they have a charming personality and a smile to match – does not mean they speak for the Lord and proclaim His truth. Be careful, because in the last days we are told there will be preachers and teachers just like this Jezebel who will tell you exactly what you want to hear.

That leads me to my next point and that is: people just don't want to hear the truth.

There is a story about a man who smoked cigarettes. He began reading articles on cigarettes and became alarmed by the strong connection between smoking and lung cancer. One day, he finally confided in a friend and said, "I've been reading so many articles about smoking and lung cancer that I've decided to quit reading."

He didn't decide to quit smoking, but to quit reading! That's what many people do when confronted with the truth about their sin. They put aside the truth to continue to live a harmful and sinful lie. Unfortunately, they will face the truth one day, and they will be without excuse.

And lastly, what God calls sin – is sin and we can't see it any other way. In our day and culture, we are pressured to be tolerant of just about everything in this world, and if we are not tolerant of the actions and the behaviors and the lifestyles that God calls sinful, then we are labeled as being phobic, and judgmental, and hateful. I don't like these labels, but as followers of Jesus Christ, we don't have the option to tolerate what God won't tolerate. We can't call "right" what God calls "wrong." We can't be Christians who pick and choose what we want to believe about sin from God's Word. We can't accept sinful actions, we can't validate sinful behaviors, and we can't approve of sinful lifestyles, for if we do, we become no different than those in Thyatira who tolerated sin.

Instead, we need to be a people who are first and foremost in love with Jesus, and then we are to be a people who sincerely love one another, and that may include lovingly dealing with sin. It's not being hateful, it's not being intolerant, and it's not being judgmental, rather, it's just being faithful and obedient to the Lord and loving others just like He loves us.

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