

ACCORDING TO YOUR WORKS

Revelation 2:18-29

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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 (Rev. 2:23).

One of the great messages of Revelation is that Christ's people are made strong and persevere by their knowledge of him. This is why Jesus appeared to John in the opening vision of chapter 1, shining forth in divine glory and garbed in the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Conversely, this fits the warning given by Jesus when he reproved false believers, saying: "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Mt. 7:22-23). As Jesus saw it, a false and dead faith results from not truly knowing him, whereas a true and obedient faith flows from knowing Jesus in a personal relationship of saving faith.

This principle explains why each of the seven letters in Revelation 2-3 begins with a piece of the portrait of Christ given in chapter 1. The churches will respond to Christ's message in light of their awareness of who and what Jesus is. This shows how important is the presentation of Christ in his fourth message, to the church in Thyatira. Here, Jesus displays presents himself in a way that many professing Christians will be challenged to accept but which should inspire us to holy, faithful lives: he is the Lord who knows our works, who hates all sin, who judges the unrepentant in his church, and who bestows glory on those who conquer in his name.

THE LORD WHO KNOWS OUR WORKS

All through the messages to his churches, Jesus says that he knows the good works of his people. This emphasis reminds us that while Christians are not saved by our works, we are able to do works that are good and are pleasing to the Lord. This is part of the great difference between the unbeliever and the believer. Unbelievers are unable to do truly good works, since all is corrupted by the presence and power of sin. Believers are born again by the Holy Spirit and equipped by God's Word "for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). This being the case, Christians should be devoted to good works. "Let your light shine," Jesus said, "so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 5:16). Jesus reminds the church in Thyatira, "I know your works" (Rev. 2:19). Likewise Jesus knows and will remember our good works when he returns from heaven. "Well done, good and faithful servant," he will tell his obedient people, "Enter into the joy of your master" (Mt. 25:21).

Having mentioned the Thyatirans' "works," Jesus specifies their "love and faith and service and patient endurance" (Rev. 2:19). Here is the kind of church we should want to be part of. Like Ephesus, the church in Thyatira had works but added the love that the Ephesians had lost. Whereas Pergamum tolerated false teachers, Thyatira preserved the faith. Like Smyrna, these Christians were patient in enduring tribulation. Moreover, the Thyatirans show how Christian virtues work together. Where there is love there will be service, and where faith flourishes there God's people will patiently endure.

What particularly stands out in Thyatira is that they were continuing to grow spiritually and in good works: Jesus says, "your latter works exceed the first" (Rev. 2:19). These believers set a good example for us today. Part of what makes Christianity so exciting is that we are called continually to grow in terms of our knowledge of God's grace (2 Pet. 3:18), our personal holiness (Eph. 4:24), our love for others and our good works. John Stott writes: "The church of Thyatira understood that the Christian life is a life of growth, of progress, of development."¹ Knowing this, each of us should pray that our "latter works" will "exceed the first."

¹ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, 67.

We know from reading this passage that Jesus is going to go on to criticize the Thyatirans. But note that he did not therefore brush aside their achievement and their virtues. James Hamilton writes: “Sometimes when we go to address problems, even ones that are not so serious, we fail to see and acknowledge the good things that may be happening. Jesus is encouraging this church. They have problems, but those problems don’t keep him from seeing and commending the fruits of the Spirit in their lives.”² Following Jesus’ gracious example, when we are dealing with churches or people who need to be corrected, we would be wise to notice their strengths and praise their virtues, in this way opening a door for the harder message they may be thus more willing to receive. Given our own weakness and tendency to failure, how wonderful is it to learn that Jesus knows, cares, and appreciates all the good things taking place in our lives as his people.

THE LORD WHO DESPISES SIN

Despite the initially good impression of Thyatira, there was a very serious problem. For all its love, faith, service, steadfastness, we heard no commendation for its holiness. This is a matter about which Jesus cares very deeply, and his rebuke and warning over tolerated sins makes this the longest of the seven messages to the churches.

Unlike the previous cities mentioned in these letters, Thyatira was not a great city. It was a market city, situated on the main route between Pergamum and Sardis. As such, Thyatira was dominated by the trade guilds that oversaw its various industries: wool, linen, dyes, clothing manufacturers, leather works, potters, bakers, and bronze works.³ Each guild paid homage to pagan gods, especially Apollo and Artemis. This homage included attendance at the gods’ sacred festivals, eating meals in their temples, and participating in the sexual immorality involved in many of the pagan rituals. Simon Kistemaker writes: “Christians who refused to honor pagan gods, eat meat sacrificed to an idol, and engage in sexual immorality jeopardized their material necessities. They were regarded as outcasts of society.”⁴

² James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 96.

³ Sir William Ramsay, cited by Leon Morris, 69.

⁴ Simon Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 136.

It is in this context that we may understand Jesus' complaint: "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" (Rev. 2:20). Unlike Pergamum, which was tolerating a whole group of false teachers, the Nicolaitians, in Thyatira there was a persuasive woman in the church, who claimed to possess prophetic gifts, whose teaching seduced Christ's servants into becoming the slaves of sin. The designation Jezebel should not be taken as her name but rather describes her in terms of the famous Old Testament villainess.

In the 9th century B.C., Jezebel was an unbelieving princess from Sidon who Israel's king Ahab married for political reasons. Jezebel brought her false gods with her, and soon her legions of pagan priests had spread the worship of Baal and Ashtaroath throughout the land. The Israelites were seduced with the idea that these Sidonian gods, male and female, would bring economic prosperity in the form of fertile lands and fertile wombs. Jezebel's idolatry, which involved ritual prostitution at the pagan shrines, swept through God's people.

Jesus' use of the name Jezebel indicates what Thyatira's false prophetess was teaching. This second Jezebel encouraged Christians to participate in the ceremonies and feasts of the trade-guilds, even to participate in the sexual sin and eat the food sacrificed to idols. Just as the original Jezebel urged the Israelites to worship Baal and Ashteroth alongside the Lord, this new Jezebel urged Christians that their faith in Jesus need not exclude them from the guild idolatry that was essential to prosperous living in that city. Douglas Kelly writes: "She must have said, 'Let's mingle with these people during the week; let's go to their religious services, and participate in their feasts. Then they will realize that we too know how to have fun, and are not judgmental of them.'"⁵ Jezebel's doctrine stated that one might please both God and the world and that Christians do not have to be different from others just because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

This woman's presence in an otherwise outstanding church reminds us of the variety of attacks Satan may launch. Revelation mentions the beast from the sea, who stands for government persecution, and the beast from the earth, who bring false teaching in the church. Where these fail to hinder Christ's people, Satan has a third approach,

⁵ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 57.

Babylon the harlot, who seduces people through the pleasures of sin. John Stott writes: “If the devil cannot destroy the church by persecution or heresy, he will try to corrupt it with evil.”⁶ This was the role played by the Jezebel in the church of Thyatira.

Jesus’ response to this Jezebel’s seductive ministry reminds us of two things concerning sexual purity. First, the Bible associates sexual sin with idolatry. The Old Testament often compared idolatry to sexual infidelity. Hosea condemned Israel, saying, “the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (Hos. 1:2). Jeremiah complained that by worshiping at Baal altars and Asherah poles, Jews “polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree” (Jer. 3:9). Sex is God’s gift to be blessed within marriage and for the procreation of holy children. Those who engage in sexual sin divorce God’s gift from God’s holy purpose and thus make a god of their own desires. This is why Paul wrote: “Flee from sexual immorality... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:16-20).

Second, Jesus’ emphasis highlights the importance of sexual purity to the Christian life. In general, the idea that believers in Christ may continue to live like the world is false. James wrote: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Ja. 4:4). This principle is especially true when it comes to the Christian calling to sexual purity, through abstinence outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage. The Bible says: “this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3). Jesus therefore rebuked the church in Thyatira: “I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who... [is] seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality” (Rev. 2:20).

It is evident that Christ’s rebuke of sexual sin needs to be heard by professing Christians today. A 2011 survey by a Christian magazine reported that 80% of unmarried Christians had sinned sexually and that two-thirds of unmarried Christians between the ages of 18 and 29 had been involved in a sexual relationship within the previous year. Professing Christians were also involved in the sin of abortion.

⁶ Stott, 69.

Studies show that 37 percent of women obtaining abortions identify themselves as Protestant Christians, along with another 28 percent who are Roman Catholic. The rationale for this sin was expressed in the article's title, "(Almost) Everyone's Doing It."⁷

Christians who have joined in with the sexual sin of our culture have evidently forgotten that Jesus is a holy Lord who hates all sin, and especially sexual sin. The Bible commands the Christian to "know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:4-5). Sex itself, within the holy context of marriage, is neither shameful nor sinful, having been given by God to bond a husband and wife emotionally and spiritually. Therefore, Christians should grow in maturity so as to enter into a godly marriage with a fellow believer. Paul wrote: "it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9). Hebrews 13:4 says: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." Christians should therefore promote the sanctity of marriage by refusing to engage in sexual sin outside of marriage and promoting joyful Christian marriages where sexuality is blessed by God. To this end, Christians should prepare our sons and daughters to be godly husbands and wives, prayerfully urging them not to worship at the altars of pleasure and ego at which our generation commits idolatry against the Lord.

Jesus shows believers what price we must be willing to pay out of faithfulness to him in his comments about food sacrificed to idols. Guild membership required participation at pagan feasts, in which false gods were worshiped by receiving food at their table. William Barclay writes that refusing to join these feasts "[cut] off Christians from all social fellowship with non-Christians." Moreover, "Christians' abstention from guild membership was equivalent to commercial suicide."⁸ In such a situation, Christians were to be willing to suffer for Christ, while trusting the Lord to provide for them in light of their refusal to seek prosperity by means of idolatry.

The cost of being faithful to Christ was made poignant when the early church leader Tertullian rebuked a believer for participating in idolatry because of his business. The man defended his sin, saying,

⁷ Tyler Charles, "(Almost) Everyone's Doing It, *Relevant*, Issue 53, Sept/Oct. 2011.

⁸ Barclay, 118.

“After all, I must live.” Tertullian answered, “Must you?”⁹ There is no calling higher than our faithfulness to Christ, including our very lives. James Boice writes: “The early Christians knew that neither obeying the state, getting along or sharing in the life of those around us justifies idolatry or immorality... When Paul argued that it was permissible to eat meat that had been offered to idols, he did not say that it was right to do it in a pagan temple as part of a pagan worship service. When Jesus told us to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, he limited that requirement by adding, ‘and to God what is God’s.’”¹⁰

THE LORD WHO JUDGES HIS CHURCH

I said earlier that Christians may not easily accept the description of Jesus that is found in the message to Thyatira. This is particularly the case with the depiction of Christ as the Lord who judges his church. What would most evangelical Christians today think if they were told that not only that Jesus hates sin but that he commands church discipline and threatens to strike dead church members who do not repent? The evidence suggests that most evangelicals would be appalled by such a portrait of Christ. Yet this is exactly how Jesus presents himself to the church in Thyatira. Speaking of their “Jezebel,” Jesus writes: “Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation..., and I will strike her children dead” (Rev. 2:22-23).

Before judging his people, Christ first gives a call to repentance. This shows that his purpose is not to harm but to save his followers. Christ has goodwill even for people in serious sin, like Jezebel. He says, “I gave her time to repent” (Rev. 2:21). This indicates that church leaders had previously confronted her for her false teaching and her wicked behavior. Here we see the importance of loving and faithful church discipline. Jesus reminds Christians to take biblical reproofs seriously, especially when coming from faithful pastors or church elders. “But she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality,” Jesus said, and therefore his judgment was the only recourse.

The question is raised as to whether Jesus is judging believers with a temporal or an eternal punishment, and thus as to whether they will go to heaven or hell. The answer to this question can only be seen in

⁹ Cited from Boice, 9:9.

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 9:9.

whether or not such persons can be considered true believers. There are cases in the New Testament where it seems that genuine believers who sin grievously are judged. An example is that of Ananias and Sapphira, who were slain for lying to the Holy Spirit in falsely boasting about financial gifts to the church (Acts 5:1-10).

Presumably, they went to heaven after death, as true but foolish believers in Christ. It is hard to imagine how this could be said about a woman like the Jezebel of Thyatira, though it is possible. The main point is that Jesus judges his saved people in pursuit of the holiness of his church, even inflicting death upon some for their sins. He says he “will strike her children dead,” which presumably refers to her followers in sin. The principle for Christ’s judgment is given in verse 23: “I will give to each of you according to your works.” Those who persist in flagrant sin, refusing to respond to biblical calls to repentance, may suffer strong chastisement from Christ both for their own preservation and for the well-being of the church.

If we find it hard to accept that Christ judges his people, the picture of Jesus given at the beginning of this letter should persuade us: “The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze” (Rev. 2:18). This is the only time the title “Son of God” is used of Christ in Revelation. Given the later quote from Psalm 2, it probably is used to emphasize Christ’s royal prerogative in judging all peoples: “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled” (Ps. 2:11-12). Moreover, Christ’s flaming eyes can penetrate into every heart, seeing both good works and shameful sins. His feet “like burnished bronze” reveal him as without blemish and as one who comes resolutely to punish sin.

If the believers of Thyatira had forgotten these truths about Jesus, his judgment on those committing idolatry would remind them that Jesus is not an absentee landlord but a sovereign ruler of his kingdom. He says of his judgment of Jezebel and her followers: “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” (Rev. 2:23). This calls us, first, to believe on Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. He said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn. 6:29). Having been saved from sin by Christ’ blood, Christians must then pursue holiness and good works, knowing that Jesus will not fail

to notice and bless them, and realizing that as a holy Lord Jesus will chastise us for gross, scandalous sins that dishonor his name.

THE LORD WHO BESTOWS GLORY

This portrait of Christ provides numerous motivations to live godly lives, including our awareness that Christ hates sin and judges his church. A final reason is that Jesus is a reasonable and mild ruler, who graciously gives glory to those who conquer in his name.

The mildness of Christ is seen in his address to those who have not participated in Jezebel's sins: "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. Only hold fast what you have until I come" (Rev. 2:24-25).

When Jesus speaks of "the deep things of Satan," he probably is noting the false prophetess Jezebel's claim that her worldly accommodation involved an advanced Christianity that only a few could comprehend. Instead, Jesus said, her teaching that Christians can safely enter into sin involves not deep Christianity but bondage to Satan. Christians are not to try to enter into esoteric knowledge or advanced states of spirituality beyond what is taught in the Bible. Instead, we are to hold fast what Christ has revealed to us already in Scripture. Christ's burdens are not actually heavy: "my yoke is easy and my burden is light," Jesus said (Mt. 11:30). We are reminded of the commands given at the Jerusalem Council, when the apostles determined the obligation of Gentile believers. They were to "abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:20). Derek Thomas explains that believers: "are to live by the standards of the revealed Word of God and no more. As John said elsewhere: 'His commandments are not burdensome'" (1 Jn. 5:3).¹¹

Though not burdensome, Jesus is generous beyond all expectation. He promises two remarkable blessings to those who persevere in true, obedient faith, not mixing Christianity with idolatrous pagan practices. The first has to do with a share in Christ's sovereign rule: "The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod

¹¹ Derek Thomas, *Let's Study Revelation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 32.

of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father” (Rev. 2:26-27).

Here, Jesus is quoting from Psalm 2, where God tells his Son: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel” (Ps. 2:8-9). We can understand how Christians participate in Christ’s rule, but it is hard to see what it means for us to “break” others with an iron rod and “dash them in pieces” like pieces of pottery. The key to understanding this promise is to note how Jesus has modified Psalm 2 in our case, so that instead of wielding an iron rod to “break” people, authority is given us to “rule them” (Rev. 2:29). Here, the Greek word for “rule” means to “shepherd” (Greek, *poimaino*). The promise, then, is that Christ will grant his faithful people the ability faithfully to shepherd in his flock, using the rod to protect them from those who would harm them.

“Authority over the nations,” is exercised through the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20), as Christians go throughout the world with the saving gospel that leads others to Christ. Faithful servants are empowered to shepherd, spiritually rule, and defend other believers. Jesus promises that faithful church leaders will be enabled to lead the church in godly ways, guiding Christ’s sheep in paths of righteousness and wielding spiritual weapons to preserve them from every source of fear (see Ps. 23:3-4). Faithful and holy Christian parents will be able to lead their children in godly paths unto salvation. Christian men and women will have power to exercise a gracious influence in the workplace, leading others to Christ and helping them to grow in godliness.

Lastly, Jesus promises to the believer who perseveres in a godly faith: “And I will give him the morning star” (Rev. 2:28). Jesus interprets the meaning of this promise in Revelation 22:16, saying, “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” Jesus is promising to give himself, the light who shines brightly to cast away all darkness, as the most precious gift to his faithful people. Together with himself, however, he is promising that we ourselves will enter into that shining brightness of glory through union with Christ in faith. Even in this life, Christians are empowered by Christ to “shine as lights in the world,” as “children of God without blemish in the midst

of a crooked and twisted generation... holding fast to the word of life” (Phil. 2:15-16).

How bright is the light of Christ in the holy life of a faithful Christian, whether in Thyatira or in the places where we stand apart for Jesus today! But when the morning of the resurrection comes, then the light of Christ and his people will shine with a glory that we can scarcely comprehend today. Daniel 12:3 says: “those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”