

Revelation 2 (18-29) – Children of a False God

The Bible is about God revealing himself, and redeeming people. It is God's person, work, and will mapped out through human history. But the book of Revelation, with all of its symbols, numbers, images, and apocalyptic prophecy seems quite mysterious. However, God isn't trying to make the end of the age some great mystery, shrouded in secrecy. It's called the Revelation, after all. And its message is absolutely clear, even if some of the imagery isn't as immediately clear.

The message of Revelation is not primarily about the tribulation, or the rapture, or how Israel will be attacked, or the one world government, or the antichrist, or the battle of Armageddon. The Revelation is a revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord. It is about who Christ is, and what he has done, continues to do, and will do, for his people.

In chapters 2 and 3, Jesus speaks individually to seven different churches. But these letters are representative of all the people in all of God's churches through all of time. While each letter addresses a particular situation in a particular church, Jesus is pointing in a timeless way to the challenges and potential problems of all of his churches of all times. And what Jesus says to one, he says to all, including you as a part of the church. This is a right now word.

As the lead in to the seven letters, in chapter 1:9-20, Jesus is revealed in a many-faceted portrait of his person, divinity, rule, and work. And the introduction to each letter focuses on the particular facet of that portrait that suits that particular church. It is the particular thing that they need to hear about him, in order to endure persecution, to remain faithful, and to repent where needed.

When each letter starts with "And to the angel of the church, write", it is talking about each church as a whole. A messenger was sent to John on the Island of Patmos, off the coast of modern-day Turkey, where he had been exiled. Then the messenger would deliver that letter to the church. It wasn't intended only for the messenger as "the angel" but he represented the whole church, to whom he delivered the message to. Jesus is saying, "John, write this down for your messenger, and tell the people this..."

Ephesus received the first letter because it was the closest church from where the Apostle John was. The distance from Ephesus to Smyrna was about 50 miles north, and Smyrna to Pergamum about another 50 miles north. Then from Pergamum you would travel southeast about 40 miles to Thyatira, the church letter we will examine today.

Each of these letters starts with an introduction, then an examination, followed by an exhortation, and ending with a motivation. In the letter to Thyatira, the introduction is in vs.18, the examination in vs.19-21, the exhortation is in vs.22-25, and the motivation is given in vs.26-29.

Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities that John wrote to. Unlike Pergamum, it didn't have any great religious identity, political influence, or military significance. In fact, it had a history of being destroyed and rebuilt. But it was a center for trade (cf. Acts 16:14), and there were many trade guilds there. Think of them like a modern-day labor union. And each of these trade guilds would have a patron god, and they would hold feasts which included pagan rituals and sexual immorality. And so, if you wanted to earn a living, you would be exposed to all of the idolatry and

debauchery. So, the church at Thyatira was tempted to compromise spiritually and morally based on economic pressures. And they had given into it. And they were happy about it. But Jesus wasn't.

This is the longest letter written to the smallest city. Jesus cares about his local churches, and what matters is not the size of them, what matters is the purity of them. Thyatira is an example of what compromise with the world leads to, idolatry and immorality. They were not so concerned about obedience to the Lord of the Church. And when you love the Lord less, you love the world more.

So, they tolerated false teaching, instead of examining, exposing, and eradicating it. And they tolerated sin, and not in a merciful way that would graciously lead others to repentance, but in a licentious way that hardened people in their rebellion. People would claim to be Christians, but they would think like the world, act like pagans, and call it freedom. It sounds just like today.

Vs.18 – This reminds you of Revelation 1:13-15. The church at Thyatira needed to see Jesus as *the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze*. This refers to the fact that Jesus will examine, discern, and judge the church, and its people, not superficially, but deeply, and comprehensively. He won't just look at their works from an outside point of view, but from the perspective of their internal desires and motivations.

You'll notice that instead of calling himself the Son of Man (1:13), Jesus introduces himself as the Son of God. Why does he do that? To show the contrast. When you think of the Son of Man, you think of God identifying with our humanity in the person of Jesus. You think about his mercy, and his compassion. But when you think of the Son of God, you think of Jesus identifying with his divine nature. You think about his might, his holiness, and his judgment. The church at Thyatira needed to remember the one who they worship is the Almighty God. Jesus is the eternal judge.

And they needed to know that he is a perfect judge. When the text says *he has eyes like a flame of fire*, it reminds you of Revelation 19:11-12 – *Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire...* This refers to Jesus as having a laser like ability to focus in on the falsehoods and flaws of the church and its people. His eyes light up the situation, nothing of the darkness is hidden to him. And they burn right through all the coverups and delusions people hide behind. He sees all and knows all and he can see right through all the pretensions and know what your true motivations and actions really are. He sees the church as it really is and he sees your life for what it really is. Jesus knows not only your actions but your ambitions and attitudes.

In other words, Jesus is kind, merciful, patient and loving, but you can't play games with him. He knows your heart better than you do. He gives you time to repent, but as Proverbs 29:1 says, "*He who is often reproofed, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing.*" He says if there is no repentance, he will bring judgment, and the church will become an object lesson. Vs.23 – *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.* What are you waiting for? I don't know how much time you have, but I know this; your time is running out. Your age doesn't matter. Someday it will be too late.

The church at Thyatira, and this church, and you, need to remember that Jesus is the eternal judge, a perfect judge, and a pure judge. When the text says his *feet are like burnished bronze*, this refers

to purity and judgment. Speaking of the purity of angels, Ezekiel 1:7 says their feet *sparkled like burnished bronze*. Looking to Revelation 19:15 it says that Jesus *will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty*. Revelation 2:18 pictures the Lord and his divine authority, penetrating vision, and pure judgment. Jesus demands purity in your doctrine and life.

This purity is not perfection. You won't do things perfectly, but you must do things purposefully. This is about integrity. This is about repentance. It is about a purifying process. The Latin term is "*semper reformanda*", which means always reforming. The true Christian life is about conforming your beliefs and actions to the Bible. Hebrews 4:12 says that the Bible can discern *the thoughts and intentions of the heart*. And when you find that something in your doctrine and life doesn't match the Bible, you change. When you have a god that says you don't need to change then your god is you. Don't be fooled by the modern-day churches of Thyatira. You can't use pragmatic popularity and call it reaching people for Jesus. It's a false gospel. Jesus demands repentance. Luke 24:47 says *that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name*.

Having given his introduction, Jesus moves on to his examination of the church at Thyatira.

Vs.19 – it wasn't like there were no real believers in the church. You see this in vs.24. And even in a true church there are a mixture of true and false believers. And even bad churches can do good things. Jesus commends the church for its works of love, faith, service and patient endurance. And he says that they have increased in these things. They did a lot and they grew a lot.

Put these four things together and see the picture. They were faithful to persevere in lovingly meeting the needs of other people. These are good things. And there are many churches that do these same sorts of things today, where they are involved in helping needy people, providing services and social programs. That's not bad. But some also have the same problem as Thyatira. Jesus isn't saying that serving people is wrong, but it is no excuse for false doctrine and loose living. Service is no substitute for doctrine, purity, or repentance. Of course, the world celebrates this sort of church. But God doesn't. The gospel should lead to social action. But a social gospel with no real repentance and false doctrine is no real gospel at all.

This church was popular, and growing. However, sin was apparently tolerated by the majority. In the spirit of pragmatism, and for the sake of church growth, they had mixed themselves with worldly, sinful ideals. And it worked, in terms of social success. But what they tolerated was something that Jesus didn't. And he was going to do something about it.

Vs.20 – here is the issue spelled out. There are a lot of people who pay lip service to Jesus, and a lot of people who do social service in the name of Jesus. They may sing the songs and give their gifts at Christmastime. They may attend church and even volunteer for service. But Jesus is not really the Lord of their lives. He is not the center of their thoughts and giving him glory is not the aim of their ambitions. They are still in control. They serve Jesus on their own terms, and they love a Jesus who is sentimental, humanistic, and who doesn't interfere with their comfort and pleasure and self-interest. They don't love the real Jesus, *who is the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze*. They don't actually serve the eternal, all seeing, perfect and pure judge. Their false Jesus lets them continue to be their own lord. In Luke

6:46 Jesus points out the inconsistency of people like this, saying, “*Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?*” It is just as much a problem today as it was back then.

Jesus tells you who it was that led the people away from a true devotion to the true Lord of the Church. It was Jezebel. Now this was probably not her real name. It is most likely symbolic of a prominent woman in the church. Jesus is identifying her with the same sort of wickedness promoted by that OT character. You find her infamous story in 1 Kings 16-21 and 2 Kings 9. Jezebel was a power-hungry, control seeking, abusive woman, who’s sense of entitlement justified using whatever means necessary to obtain the power and control she wanted. She married King Ahab of Israel and led her husband and the nation into idol worship. She threatened and killed the true prophets of God. She was guilty of whoredom and witchcraft. When you read her story, you’ll find that Jezebel ranks as one of the most wicked people in the entire Bible.

Now what were Jezebel and the church in Thyatira doing to displease the Lord?

But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel – the church was guilty of tolerating a false teacher. Of course, to be able to tolerate her meant that they were already aware of her. She had risen to some sort of prominence. She claimed to be a prophetess. But instead of examining, exposing, and eradicating her false teaching, they just let it go on. It was a successful message. The people were satisfied in their sin. In vs.21 you see that they also must have known how she had been given a warning, but she stubbornly refused to listen. And they didn’t do anything else about it. The steps of biblical church discipline were not faithfully followed by this church. She should have been put out of the church for what she did.

Well, what did she do? Jesus says that she *is teaching and seducing my servants*. The fact that Jesus says she seduces his servants into sinful behavior distinguishes this woman from his servants and his Church. She is present in the church. She might be claiming the name of Christ, but she is described like the Jezebel of old. She is outside the kingdom of God but she has a presence among the people of God, and she is having an idolatrous influence in the life of the church.

This woman had a seductive influence. The same Greek word for seducing is used in 2 Peter 2:15, where Peter is talking about false teachers, and he says, “*Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing*”. 1 Timothy 4:1 uses a form of this word also, saying *that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons*. This woman was using demonic doctrine to control the people in order fulfill her own lusts.

What was she teaching? She was teaching the church *to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols*. In other words, she was teaching that it was ok to go along with those wicked feasts held by the trade guilds which included pagan rituals and sexual immorality. She said it was good to partner with the world for financial gain, and it wasn’t wrong to go along with all of the idolatry and debauchery. She was teaching grace as a license to sin. The books of 2 Peter and Jude deal with this very thing. But she said God will not only understand, he will bless you for it. She said you can improve your life and build the church if you party with the pagans. She was modeling that very thing. And the naive people ate it up. Like the false prophets of today, she said look at how successful I am, and look at how successful I have helped make this church.

She was able to turn their eyes from a pure devotion to Jesus. And so, they tolerated sin, not in a merciful way that would graciously lead others to repentance, but in a licentious way that hardened people in their rebellion. They celebrated their success, and reveled in their sin. They claimed to be Christians, but they thought like the world, acted like pagans, and called it freedom. As Philippians 3:19 says, *they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things*. Is that you?

Now, having given his introduction to the church, and his examination of the church, Jesus moves on to his exhortation for the church.

Vs.22 – This sure doesn't sound like the sentimental, humanistic, therapeutic, go along to get along Jesus that the world loves, does it? No, this is the Jesus who is Lord of the Church, and he is coming to judge it, and the people in it.

First, he is going to judge that false teacher. When Jesus says *I will throw her onto a sickbed*, he is contrasting that with her adulterous bed. He will expose it for what it truly is, sick. And he is going to punish her for seducing his people to sin, possibly with death. If you read about how old Jezebel's life ended, you know it wasn't pretty. She was torn apart and eaten by dogs right in the middle of the street. The judgment of Jesus on false teachers will be severe.

Second, Jesus is going to judge those who had followed her false teachings. He says *those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation*. But he tells them that they have a last chance, that the judgment is coming *unless they repent of her works*. You can avoid the judgment of Jesus if you will repent, turning from thinking and acting like grace is a license to sin. If you stop giving in to the influence of the world and celebrating sin. And if you stop making a fraud of God for your financial gain. The time to repent is right now!

Otherwise, you'll end up like all of Jezebel's spiritual children. In vs.23 Jesus says *I will strike her children dead*. Jezebel's children are those who are not only being influenced by her, they are promoting her wicked ideas. They are gaining from spreading and teaching her demonic doctrine. And apart from repentance they will die. Christ will not allow this influence to continue.

Jesus will judge the person who propagates a false gospel. And Jesus will hold accountable and judge any church who permits anyone to pervert Scripture so as to lead the people astray into living like grace is a license to sin. They may seem to get away with it for now, but they won't get away with it forever. Tradition tells us that this church did not repent, and that sometime in the second century, they went out of existence. As always, Jesus was and is telling the truth.

Finally, Jesus says that the memory of this woman and this church will be an object lesson to warn other people and other churches. Jesus says that when his judgment falls, "*...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*." It will be a reminder that the one *who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze* deals with people as they really are and as they deserve to be dealt with. Let this be a lesson to all of us today. Jesus won't play around with your sin, so why should you?

Now in vs.24, Jesus speaks to those in the church *who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan*. What does he mean by that? Well, first of all, he

is talking about what he has already said. The old Jezebel was involved in witchcraft, and led the people into idolatry and immorality. This new Jezebel was doing the same thing. She was leading people into the very depths of satanic teaching and telling them that it was a good thing, that they could still be a Christian and that God would bless them for it. But Jesus hates Jezebel.

Still, even in this worldly church with such a wicked teacher, there were faithful believers. Jesus tells the faithful, those who weren't enticed by that false teacher, or enslaved by that false teaching that *I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come.* Jesus is saying to keep on standing and living against that false teaching. Keep on being faithful to persevere in lovingly meeting the needs of other people. Keep on putting your hope in my return. Keep on living for today by having an eye for tomorrow.

Having given his introduction, his examination, and his exhortation, Jesus gives the motivation.

In vs.26-27, Jesus alludes to an Old Testament promise that is fulfilled in Christ. We read Psalm 2 this morning. Psalm 2:8-9 speak of Christ ruling the nations with a rod of iron, establishing his kingdom, and destroying all that oppose him. He is telling you that when he comes again his people will share in his authority, they will share in his rule, and they will share in his victory.

Revelation 1:6 says Jesus has *made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.*

Revelation 12:5 says Jesus *is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.*

Revelation 19:15-16 says, "*From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.*"

As glorious as all that is and will one day be, there is something much more. In vs.28, Jesus gives you an additional promise. When he says *I will give him the morning star*, it reminds you of Revelation 22:16. "*I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.*" Jesus is the morning star. And in the end, what matters most is that Jesus gives you himself. That will be the greatest blessing of eternity. And even now, as you overcome the temptations to be more like the world, you are graced with more of the presence of God.

Vs.29 concludes with, *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* Jesus is addressing all the people in all of his churches that have spiritual understanding. He is saying that you need to recognize him Jesus for who he is, the Son of God. He is the eternal, perfect, and pure judge. He demands that his Church and his people go through the purifying process.

When you have a god that says you don't need to change then your god is you. But Jesus demands repentance. Jesus is giving you time and space for grace, but your time is running out, and the time to repent is right now.

The question is which God are you listening to today?