

Introduction

Located on the River Walk just south of Wells Street is one of Milwaukee's "must visit" sites. There stands a life-size statue of "the Fonz" as played by Henry Winkler in the TV series "Happy Days." The statue is formed out of bronze and thus often referred to as "the Bronze Fonz." Bronze has a long-standing history going back as far as 4500 BC. It has long been one of the strongest, most durable, and most widely used metals. It is an alloy made mostly of copper but with smaller proportion of tin. The two metals are much stronger together than either is by itself. Bronze was important in the city of Thyatira in the New Testament era. The city bronze guild was known for a burnishing process unique to itself. In his letter to the church in Thyatira, Jesus draws on the city's familiarity with bronze to make an important point about himself and to alert the church of its need to repent.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main point of Jesus's letter to the church in Thyatira is to express that he is jealous for the single-hearted devotion of his bride. Those who seek to dislodge his churches from such devotion will face his sternest retribution.

I. The Place of the Church

A. Thyatira is the location of the church in Asia Minor that received Jesus's fourth and longest letter. I call it T-town in part because it is easier to say, but also because Thyatira was known as much as anything for its wide assortment of Trade guilds. Archaeological discoveries reveal that there were more such guilds in Thyatira than in the surrounding cities. T-town was not the location of a famous temple, but it was located on a major trade route. Thyatira was a busy working city that included guilds for bakers, bronze workers, garment makers, shoe makers, weavers, tanners, dyers of cloth, pottery makers, and slave merchants. T-town was also, of course, a hotbed of idolatry. That is because each trade guild worshiped its own patron god or goddess. I think I mentioned this situation last week.

The guilds would meet regularly to worship their gods and consume food offered to those gods. Then they would engage in sexual immorality in order to seek the favor of that god. Making a living would be difficult without belonging to a guild, but belonging to a guild would mean participation in its idolatry and adultery and immorality.

B. Do you remember in Acts the account of Paul as he came to the city of Philippi? He was looking for a place of prayer and discovered a group of women, one of whom was Lydia, a seller of purple goods. She hailed from the city of Thyatira. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to the gospel. She and her household believed and were baptized. We do not know exactly how the Thyatira church got its start but I suppose it could have been through the witness of Lydia and her family. However it got its start, the church in Thyatira faced its own challenges by being in the world.

II. The Progress of the Church

Jesus has several positive things to say about the church in Thyatira. He notes their love and their faith and their service and their patient endurance. These are important marks of a work of God. When Paul thought of the Thessalonians, he continually thought of their faith, love, and hope. Remember the critique Jesus had for the saints in Ephesus in the first of these seven letters was that

they had LEFT the love they had at first. Such is NOT the case in T-town. Love for Christ and love for one another are two of the basic characteristics that should be present and growing in the lives of Christ's followers. To the Thessalonians, Paul made this statement. "Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. BUT we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more." You can never have too much love for fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord. The good news about the church in Thyatira is that they loved. And it was increasing. They had not trailed off in this category. Their latter works exceeded the first.

We ourselves should never settle for where we are as a church family. We are going to see that there were some real problems in the church in T-town, but in one thing they rise before us as a good example. They were advancing in love and faith. And so should we. Are you striving toward love and faith in this body? Are you expanding and deepening your devotion and service to one another? Are you spending a significant amount of time investing in one another's lives and pursuit of the Lord? These are questions we should put to ourselves regularly and we should always be increasing.

There is another matter of significance I notice about Jesus here. Before he says anything negative, he accentuates the positive. It will go a long way toward strengthening the weight and worth of anything negative you must say if you bring with you the assurance that you really care. You can do that by encouraging others with the positive things that you see in them. And we should build each other up in that way.

III. The Problem in the Church

A. The Thyatira church, though it was growing in love and faith, had been invaded by a festering malignancy in the form a self-professed prophetess. Jesus announced, "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." The woman's actual name probably was not Jezebel. But Jesus calls her Jezebel to let us know what she was all about.

Jezebel is one of the most notorious women from the Old Testament. She was not an Israelite but hailed from the Phoenician region of Tyre and Sidon. Those port cities were wealthy and powerful because of their dominating trade industry. Ahab was king of the northern territory of Israel. Arguably he marriage to Jezebel was a move to preserve and strengthen the economic advantage of being a friend of the Phoenicians. But she came to Samaria with her worship of Baal and brought 850 prophets of Baal to fill the land. Under the influence of Jezebel, Ahab himself served and worshiped Baal and even built an altar and a temple to the false god right in the capital city of Samaria. According to 1 Kings 16 Ahab did more to provoke the Lord to anger than all the kings of Israel before him. It was largely attributable to the influence of Jezebel.

On the basis of this letter from Jesus to the church in Thyatira and his reference to the self-proclaimed prophetess, Jezebel, we get an idea of what was going on there. This woman gained the ear of many in the church through her claim to be a prophetess. She wielded a powerful influence and no one was challenging her. The problem was not her gender. There were other recognized prophetesses in the early church. The problem was that she was not being tested. John had written in his first epistle to "not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." Just because someone claims to speak for God does not make it so. That certainly is the case with Jezebel in T-town.

Now, what was she teaching? Apparently, she was teaching that faithfully following Christ did not demand withdrawing from participation in the idolatry and immorality of the trade guilds. In fact, she seems to have been teaching that in order to gain victory over Satan, one must be experienced in the depths of his ways. See verse 24. Her teaching advocated learning the “deep things of Satan.” Those who were beguiled by her teaching were being seduced to participation in the idolatries of the trade guilds. Hence they were expressing love for, worship of, and trust in the pagan gods. It was being done with the rationale that knowing these deep things was necessary for overcoming the devil.

I have an important exhortation here. Beware of every rationalization of what you clearly know to be sin. The heart of man is desperately sick. It is constantly on the lookout for an excuse to do what is evil. If we can be convinced that the act is not that bad, we will much more easily do it. If we can be convinced that we will be more spiritually astute because we have indulged in certain sins, we will be far more likely to commit them. Rationalizations do not change sin from being sin. Rationalizations are from the devil. He would love for you to think that you need to experience the deep things of him in order to overcome him—anything that will lead you to disobey Christ. A little more sin or a lot more sin will never make you better able to withstand the devil. It will make you more likely and more prone to cave in to him again and again with constant rationalization. When you catch your mind rationalizing in favor of sin, get up on your feet and take your thoughts swiftly in the other direction. In Thyatira, the rationalization was being preached and it was being applied. And the result was ugly. Christ’s servants were engaging in immorality and were testifying by their eating meat sacrificed to the idols that their hope and trust were in those false gods.

Fundamentally, these acts allowed the professing Christ-followers to keep their positions in the trade guilds and prosper economically. The church was becoming just like the northern kingdom under Ahab about a thousand years prior. Making a decent living in T-town meant being in a strategic alliance with others of your trade in the form of a guild. Being in a guild meant committing idolatry and immorality. Oh, okay, says Jezebel, in this case it is just fine. Economic survival demands compromise. God knows your situation. In fact, if you really want to beat Satan, you have to know him and how he operates. God fully understands. Go ahead. In essence they were building a temple for the false gods and an altar to the false gods right in the heart of the church.

We must exercise a great deal of care here so as not to quickly dismiss the problem in Thyatira as being unrelated to our own situation. Of the sins that you are wary that you are most prone to, idolatry may not be on the list, but it should be. Let me see if I can explain why.

Matthew Henry addresses the topic of eating food sacrificed to idols this way. He explains that “Eating food as part of a heathen sacrifice, was worshiping the idol to whom it was made, and having fellowship or communion with it; just as he who eats the Lord’s supper, is accounted to partake in the Christian sacrifice, or as they who ate the Jewish sacrifices partook of what was offered on their altar. . . . If Christians venture into places, and join in sacrifices to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, they will provoke God.” Arguably, the members of the church in Thyatira did not believe in these pagan deities. But the testimony they were bearing said otherwise. Before the pagans, they were in effect denying Christ. And why? All for the sake of economic gain, all so they could keep their jobs and places in society. The essence of their idolatry was not that they believed the pagan gods were real. The essence of their idolatry was that they loved the world and their comfort and pleasure in it and were willing to feign faithfulness to the false gods in order to keep it. Their idolatrous god was not that of pottery or burnished bronze or tanned leather. It was the god of comfort and pleasure. Jesus had taught during his days with the

disciples, "you cannot serve God and wealth." You cannot have two masters. You cannot worship two gods. The first commandment puts the record clearly. "You shall have NO other gods before me." In essence what these Christians were doing was committing adultery against Jesus himself. Belonging to him they were engaging in the worship of other gods for the sake of their standing in society and their comfort in the world. They were different from the believers in Smyrna. These were not impoverished. Remember what Jesus said to the Smyrna church? "I know your poverty (but you are rich)." These in T-town were not impoverished in the world, but their worship was paltry.

If you don't think these same matters impact you and me, you are dangerously mistaken. Your god is whomever or whatever you ultimately live for. He or it is the ultimate deciding factor in the decisions you make. You glorify what takes first place in your life, whatever decisions you make about even the seemingly smallest of issues—like what you eat or drink. And what does Paul say to the Corinthians? "So then, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." What did Jesus say, "But seek first the kingdom of God AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS and all these things will be added to you." Who or what rules your thoughts, desires, priorities, and behavior? That is your god. Is it Jesus? Are you trying the impossible—to love the world AND love him at the same time? Let's look at what Jesus thinks about such an attempt.

IV. The Patience of Jesus

One exhibits patience when one is being tested. Jesus was being tested by the church in Thyatira. Look at what he says about Jezebel. He says, "I gave her time to repent." He HAD BEEN PATIENT. It seems his patience was nearing an end. What does Jesus think about the teaching of Jezebel? It is clearly reprehensible to him. It is by its very nature ADULTEROUS. It is a violation of the one man-one woman covenant that illustrates his own relationship as the husband of the church. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church. Wives, respect your husbands and submit to them as the church submits to Christ.

What we have here is the flaming jealousy of Christ Jesus for his bride, the church in Thyatira. Now it is time for us to recall the way in which Jesus presented himself to this church. (Verse 18) "These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze." These are two aspects of the portrait of Christ witnessed by John in chapter 1. The relevance they have to the church in Thyatira is first that Jesus sees with laser-like eyes into their hearts. What he sees there in many of them is adultery. The relevance is also in his feet of burnished bronze. Thyatira was known for a unique process of burnishing bronze. Perhaps some of the church members belonged to that guild. Jesus depicts himself as one who will come with strong and heavy feet to tread under foot those who claim to be his but continue to adulterate themselves against him through the love of the world. The exhibition of his heavy-footed judgment targets Jezebel and those who follow her teaching. Jesus warns: "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 with dead."

Jesus is patient. He had given Jezebel time to repent. He is also giving this warning to those who follow her teaching so that they might turn and repent. I am so thankful for the patience of Jesus. How many times I have experienced his patience in my life and you in yours! His patience never excuses our unfaithfulness, but without it we would all be lost. His patience is another reason to be amazed at him, thankful to him, and resolved ever anew to follow and obey, to love and trust him.

However, the patience of Jesus is not endless. His threatened actions reveal how serious is the offense of spiritual adultery. He is jealous. And rightly so. The church has been betrothed to one husband, the one who paid the purchase price to redeem us from our ugliness and corruption to be a pure virgin for himself. Jesus' jealousy for the pure-hearted devotion of his people was demonstrated when he instructed the Israelites not to make any covenant with the inhabitants of the promised land lest they become a snare. He commanded them through Moses, "You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God)." This was the disposition of Christ to the church in Thyatira. And it is his disposition toward Grace Community Church in West Allis, Wisconsin.

In fact it is Christ's disposition to any and every church called by his name. Look. He explains why he is going to be so severe with Thyatira. It is so "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." Christ wants us to take note of Thyatira and how he dealt with the church there in order to know that he is watching us in the same way and he is jealous for us in the same way. And he will give us according to our works. He is watching us!

The Southern Baptists had their convention a little over a week ago. And a lot has been brought to light since then. In handling the business of the convention, one pastor pleaded with the attendees to bear in mind that "the world is watching us." While it is true that the world was watching, I think we are too prone to be mindful that the world is watching us. It is a problem if the thing we most care about when we are deciding what to do is that the world is watching us. The world is not our God. The world is not our creator. The world is not our savior. What really matters is that Jesus is watching us. He is searching our hearts and minds and that with eyes of fire. He is patient but not infinitely patient. If he deems he must come with feet of burnished bronze, it will be most unpleasant. But if that is what it takes he will, not only to deal with the churches themselves but also to send a resounding message to all the churches that Jesus will not abide an adulterous church that tries to put one foot in heaven and the other in the world.

V. The Prescription for the Church

Plain and simple, Jesus tells those who have bought what Jezebel is selling to repent. The kindness and mercy of Jesus are truly amazing. When the adulterous woman was brought to Christ according to John 8, remember what he said to her accusers? "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone." The accusers all left. And when it was just Jesus and the woman, he said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and from now on sin no more."

That is the way it is with the Lord. This is the salvation and forgiveness he died to provide. And he is working even now to produce a splendorous bride for himself without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. That is why he confronts this wayward but very precious church. If you are in love with the world, turn away. Turn back. If you are compromising your profession of devotion to Christ by adulterating yourself with its pleasures and pursuits, Jesus has a dire warning for you, but it is meant to turn you to him that he may bless you immeasurably. See this glorious Christ. Perhaps today for the first time in your life you see the beauty and glory of Christ against the backdrop of your sin. Oh, repent. Turn away from your sin and rest in Christ. He who knew no sin became sin in our place that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Trust in him. Follow him.

Now, if you haven't fallen into the trap of adultery with the world, then do not become complacent. Jesus knows it is a challenge to live in this world and yet not be of this world. He exhorted those who had not learned the deep things of Satan to HOLD FAST what they had until he would come.

Conclusion

I conclude with the promise Jesus makes to those who overcome, to those who conquer. To conquer would mean that either they repent of their idolatrous worldliness or that they hold fast. First, he says they will rule with him. The oppressive tyranny of the nations will ultimately be destroyed by the iron scepter of Christ. We will share in his eternal rule. So hold on now. We have been saved in this very hope.

Second, Jesus says he will give to those who overcome the morning star. What is the morning star? The Lord spoke in Numbers 24 through a reluctant prophet named Balaam to say that one day "a STAR would come out of Jacob and a scepter arise out of Israel" which would crush the enemies of the Lord. That is Jesus, right here and his people ruling with him. In Revelation 22, Jesus says of himself, "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright and morning STAR." How will Jesus give his people the bright and morning star if he is that very star? He will do so as a husband gives himself to the wife in whom he delights. He shares his very self with her and lets her know him deeply, intimately, and wonderfully. Christ gave himself for the purity of his church so he could present her to himself in a manner worthy of himself in order to give himself to her in all his bright and shining glory.

Brothers and sisters, a holy and magnificent, gracious and glorious Savior has kept himself for you; keep yourselves for him. Keep yourselves from idols! Love not the world but love its savior. Look forward to your wedding day when you will know him at a depth you could not have otherwise imagined.

Prayer

Benediction

Brothers and sisters, you have a glorious husband who loves you jealously. Be jealous for him. May the Lord thus make his face to shine upon us and give us single-hearted peace. A-men.