

Lesson 6: Message To The Churches – Thyatira

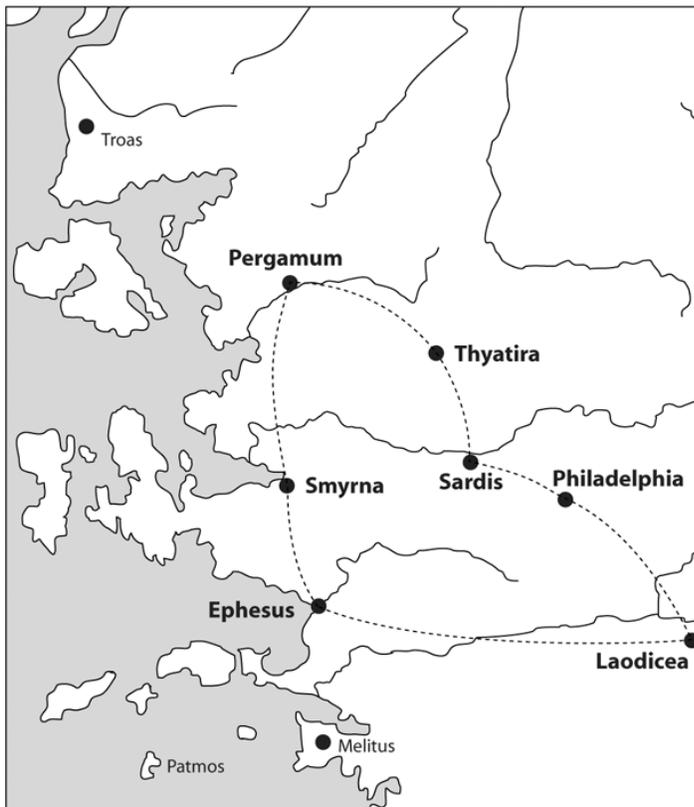
Key Text: Revelation 2:18-29

Lesson Objectives

In this lesson we will:

- a) Discover the message of Jesus sent to the church in Thyatira

THE SEVEN CHURCHES



To each individual church Jesus presents himself in a unique way. No church gets the whole Jesus, and no two of them share the same aspect of Jesus. The key to the section. As the various churches are weighed and discussed one can see the living Christ in action among His own people. He does not appear to them as the terrible sovereign on the throne nor as the conqueror riding to battle. He walks among them as a Lord who seeks to commend their virtues even more than to expose and punish their faults. These letters are His particular warning and counsel to the church of all time as its various aspects appear under the guise of their seven historic places. The glorified Lord still walks in the midst of his church. He speaks to his end-time church today through the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He presents himself to his people in various ways, addressing problems in their different life situations and needs. He meets them where they are now, as he met the Christians of those seven congregations in the province of Asia in John's day.

(Detailed appendix of the message to Thyatira).

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA - HISTORY

The city was especially known for its large number of trade guilds. Most cities in the Greco-Roman world centered on the guilds, but in Thyatira they were especially prominent (most often mentioned in inscriptions were the shoemakers, the makers and sellers of dyed cloth, and the bronze smiths). This was so because throughout its history the trades provided an auxiliary function for the military in Thyatira, a garrison town. Each craftsperson (merchants, tanners, potters, bakers, wool and linen workers, sellers of cloth, various metalworkers, etc.) was part of a "guild," and though they were not obligatory, few workers failed to belong, for the guilds were centers of social life as well as commerce.

The pressure on Christians to participate in the idolatrous life of the people was probably linked to the guilds, for their feasts were the heart of the social (and commercial) life of the city. To refuse to participate meant the loss of both goodwill and business. Guild members were expected to attend the guild festivals in the pagan temples and to share a common meal which would largely consist of meat offered to the guild's patron god; the festival often ended with drunkenness and immoral activities. Those who refused to participate in the meals would suffer ridicule and the hardships of social isolation and economic sanctions.

one element.

Description of Jesus (v. 18)

This is the only place in this book where the "Son of God" title is used, and the reason most likely lies in the centrality of Apollo, son of Zeus, in Thyatira. It is Jesus, not Apollo, who is the true Son of God (this also accounts for the quotation of Ps. 2:9 in Rev. 2:27). A frequent title in the Gospel of John (1:34; 3:18; 5:25; etc.), it connotes majesty and divinity and is an important message to this weak church to center on the true "Son of God."

The next two descriptions (eyes like a raging fire, feet like polished bronze) are taken from the initial vision of Rev. 1:14–15, where they allude to Dan. 10:6. Yet they also have special relevance to Thyatira, especially the "polished bronze," which refers to one of the major guilds of the town. As stated in Rev. 1:14–15, the "eyes like a raging fire" portray the penetrating insight and judgment of Jesus.

The flaming eyes symbolize Christ's penetrating ability to see the innermost part of human beings. The feet like burnished bronze signify his uncompromising stability.

In the desperate situation of Thyatira, with the cult movement of Jezebel running rampant in the church, they need to realize that the exalted Christ is not only aware of every aspect of the situation, but that judgment is imminent. While many members of the church may be fooled by her pernicious arguments, Jesus sees through every one, and the “raging fire” will soon sweep them away (see vv. 22–23). As discussed at 1:15, the “polished bronze” was an alloy of copper and zinc, a purer and more refined type of brass manufactured by the local guild for the military at Thyatira. As such there is likely a further opposition to the local patron god Apollo, pictured often there as a warrior god astride a horse and wielding a double-bladed battle-ax. It is Jesus who is the true divine warrior, and his power is soon to be felt by the church.

2. Strengths (2:19)

On the surface, it is a very active church, full of love and faith manifested in service and perseverance. Love and faith go together in the New Testament (cf. Gal. 5:6; Eph. 1:15; 6:23; 1 Thess. 3:6; 2 Tim. 1:13; Philem. 5). Service is the outcome of love (1 Thess. 1:3; Heb. 6:10), and perseverance the product of faith (Col. 1:23; 2 Thess. 1:4; Heb. 6:12). In the book of Revelation, faith and perseverance are the main characteristics of God’s faithful people (14:12; cf. 13:10). Moreover, Thyatira is an improving church, for her *last works are greater than the former*.

Love is indeed a primary characteristic of those who would call themselves the children of God. “Faith” is even more central to this book (see on 2:13), describing not only trust in God rather than in this world but even more a faithful perseverance in the midst of oppression and pressure from the pagans.

“Service” occurs only here in the book and refers to an active life of care and help, to charitable service and ministry to others. Service in the verse differs from other places in the Bible in that the former connotes “service” on behalf of someone while the latter speaks of “service” under or subordinate to someone (the “lord” or “master”).

“Endurance” is another major term in the book (see on 1:9; 2:2, 3), referring to an active perseverance in the midst of pressure and hard times. It is the key characteristic of the “overcomer” who remains true to God even if it means martyrdom. These four describe a life of Christian caring for others and faithfulness to God.

3. Weaknesses (v. 20-23)

In the eyes of Christ, however, an active church does not always mean a faithful church. As Barclay notes, the threat to the church has not come from outside of the church—from persecution, appealing pagan worship, or worship of the emperor. The threat has come rather from the inside, from those who claim to have authority from God but have led the church astray with the most dangerous doctrines for the Christian church—“a doctrine of compromise.”

This apostate group is referred to in terms of Jezebel, the Old Testament queen who led Israel into sin by supplanting the worship of the true God with the worship of Baal. Jezebel in Thyatira *calls herself a prophetess* (2:20). In the early church, women also received the gift of prophecy (Luke 2:36; Acts 21:9). The gift of prophecy was highly respected, because prophets were regarded as receiving direct revelation from God.

Jezebel in Thyatira claims to have that gift; she is portrayed as one who *teaches and deceives my servants to commit fornication and eat things sacrificed to idols*. This is what we met in the churches of Ephesus and Pergamum. While these two churches were beset by this same false

teaching, the church in Thyatira, as the Greek text plainly indicates, allowed or tolerated its presence.

The prophetess openly taught and promoted compromise with the world's standards, and she did it with great success, for most of the congregation followed her seductive teaching. Only a minority, who are referred to as the "remaining ones" (Rev. 2:24), had not succumbed to her persuasive influence and remained faithful to the gospel preached by John.

While the church in Ephesus lacked ardent love and focused only on the obedience to God, thus becoming legalistic and severe in dealing with and checking those who were not doctrinally sound, the church in Thyatira went to another extreme. In emphasizing love and the gospel, this church tolerated the false teaching that perverted sound doctrine and conduct, doing much harm to the purity of the gospel teaching and church unity.

Christ was not pleased with the compromising attitude of this woman and her followers. So he took some decisive steps. First, he *gave her time that she might repent*. Because she persistently refused to do so, he threatened to bring great affliction upon her and *those who commit adultery with her* (that is to say, her followers). In the Bible, unfaithfulness to God is often expressed in terms of adultery (Exod. 34:15–16; Deut. 31:16; Hos. 9:1; Matt. 12:39; Mark 8:38).

Here, Jezebel and her company, who tried to compromise and conform to the world, are described as committing spiritual infidelity. Therefore, as the final step, Jesus threatened to *kill her children* with the plague. This is a very serious threat, although the saying must be taken symbolically.

The execution of judgment on this compromising group served as a warning, with redemptive purposes, to others: *And all the churches will know that I am the One who searches kidneys and hearts, and I will give to each of you according to your works* (2:23). To search kidneys

(the seat of emotions) and hearts (the seat of intelligence or the will) belongs only to God (Jer. 17:10; cf. 1 Kings 8:39; Prov. 24:12). The Christians in Thyatira are under the scrutinizing eye of the only One who is able to penetrate the inmost thoughts, feelings, and governing motives. Nothing is hidden from Christ's penetrating gaze (Heb. 4:13).

One thing we can state with a sense of confidence: the problem in Thyatira centered on the guilds. For persons to maintain their livelihood, some connection, indeed membership, in the guilds was a virtual necessity. For Christians the problem was that this mandated participation in the guild feasts, which themselves involved "meat offered to idols", since the patron gods of the guilds were always worshiped at the feasts. "Meat offered to idols" refers to eating meat in pagan temples and religious celebrations like guild feasts. At times this could also involve immorality. The extent to which these feasts degenerated into debauchery is questionable, and many have argued that "commit adultery" here is an OT metaphor for idolatry.

For the same reasons as stated in 2:14, however, it is more likely a reference to immoral practices (though the noun form in 2:21 probably does have this figurative meaning). Whenever Christians refused to participate in the feasts because such participation would compromise their faith, they faced the anger of the pagan populace, and it had economic repercussions if they lost their jobs.

The reply of the exalted Christ is emphatic. In her teaching "Jezebel" deceives my servants. This is the only place in the book where Christians are "deceived"; elsewhere it is always unbelievers. It is possible that those who fall into this "error" are considered thereby to be unbelievers, but the use of "my servants" makes that unlikely. The verb means to "seduce" a person into sin by leading that one into error. There is a close connection between Revelation and the Olivet discourse in this, as Jesus prophesied of "false prophets" and "false messiahs" who would "deceive" many in the

church (Mark 13:5–6, 22; Matt. 24:4–5, 11, 24). Jezebel is seen as a satanic force (this is the only place in the book a person wields this terrible power) claiming the Spirit's authority (as a prophetess) but leading many of God's "servants" astray into heresy.

Due to the seriousness of the error, the only thing God can give them is the opportunity to "change" their ways (the meaning of "repentance"; see 2:5). However, the "time" for that is almost up, and judgment is imminent (2:22–23). It is likely that John or some other leader had already warned Jezebel (she alone is mentioned here, but the whole movement is addressed through her), either by prophetic utterance or in accordance with 3 John 10, "If I come, I will call attention to what he is doing." In 1 Cor. 14:29, 32 (cf. 1 John 4:1) the leaders were to "test" prophetic utterances to determine which were from God. Jezebel failed the test but was "not willing" to repent, with the present tense referring to ongoing attempts to help her get right with God. Unlike 2:14, 20, here adultery is metaphorical, following the OT tendency (cf. Isa. 57:3, 8; Hos. 9:1) to use it for "playing the harlot" with other gods. Since it is by itself, it functions as a summary term reflecting both sins of verse 20 (idolatry and immorality). Jezebel's willingness to participate in pagan religious practices was to "commit adultery" against God.

Counsel (v. 24, 25)

Jesus called those who remained faithful in Thyatira "the remaining ones." This phrase is used in the book of Revelation in a special sense with reference to God's faithful end-time people (12:17). These remaining ones are those *who have not known the deep things of Satan*.

The verb “to know” in the Bible means more than intellectual knowledge; it denotes the knowledge that comes through experience, including the sexual relationship (cf. Gen. 4:1; 19:5, 8). This remnant has not been involved in the spiritual adultery of experiencing in their lives the depth of Satan’s deceptive teaching, but has remained loyal and unaffected by his deception. And Jesus promises that he will *not lay on you another burden, except, hold what you have until I come*. “Another burden” refers clearly to the instruction given by the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:28–29).

The “you” who have remained true to the Lord have two distinguishing characteristics: a refusal to succumb to the false teaching and a rejection of the Satan-inspired “deep things” of the cult movement. First, “they do not hold” means to reject or refuse to accept “this teaching.” While they have tolerated the movement, the majority still do not accept (note the present tense) its precepts. Second, they have never “known” or adhered to this movement.

6. Challenge to Overcome (v. 26-29)

The overcomers in Thyatira, those who remain loyal to Christ, are given a twofold promise. First, they will be given *authority over the nations*. We recall the words of Psalm 2:8–9: “Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shalt shatter them like earthenware.”

Jesus has been given the authority to rule over the nations (Rev. 12:5; 19:15; cf. Matt. 28:18; Rev. 12:10). To the church in Thyatira, he gave the promise that the day is coming when the faithful and loyal remnant will share in the authority of Jesus; they will rule with him (cf. Rev. 1:6; 3:21). The fulfillment of the promise given in Psalm 2 is realized in Revelation 20–22, when God’s people are on the throne and rule with Jesus in the heavenly places.

A second promise is given: *And I will give him the morning star.* In Revelation 22:16, Jesus calls himself “the Bright Morning Star.” All of this reminds us of Balaam’s prophecy: “A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel” (Num. 24:17). As Barclay points out, “the promise of the morning star is the promise of Christ himself.” Not only will the conquerors be with Christ and rule with him, but they will have a special and close relationship with him; they will never lose him and will be with him forever.

Call to hear the Spirit. The experience of a minority of the believers in the church of Thyatira proves that love and faith manifested in Christian service and perseverance can be experienced even in churches where the majority have chosen to follow a way of compromise to the world’s standards and conform to a non-Christian lifestyle. Christian service and perseverance are the result of the working and transforming influence of the Holy Spirit upon the heart, and they are not conditioned by favorable circumstances.

Historical application. Applied historically, the Middle Ages, or so-called Dark Ages (the sixth up to the sixteenth century), fit well into the time of the church in Thyatira. It was a dark and difficult period in the history of the Christian church when church tradition replaced the Bible as the source of teaching and conduct. Rather than teaching true biblical doctrine and conduct, the church was promoting sinful action and false teaching and things contrary to the Bible. Thus people were led astray from the simplicity of the gospel; works came to be regarded as a means of earning salvation. Those who resisted the apostasy and corrupting influences of the institutional church experienced rejection and persecution. Toward the end of this period, many voices of reform arose which led toward the movements of the Reformation and a revival of the simplicity and the purity of the gospel.