

VISION OF JESUS — VIEW OF HIS CHURCH

8. Thyatira: The Church That Tolerated Evil

Revelation 2:18-29

INTRODUCTION

This morning we are in our 8th installment of our study of the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation titled: “A Vision of Jesus — His View of the Church.”

We find ourselves reading the fourth of seven letters that Jesus wrote to seven churches in Asia Minor at the close of the first century.

Here’s the preamble for each of these studies!

We want to remember that the words of Jesus to those 1st century churches (and the individuals within those churches) are **prophetic!** They carry **wisdom** and **application** for **all** churches throughout history **until** Jesus comes again. We need to hear those words of Jesus to those seven 1st century churches as if they were written to us because they are the **living — powerful and enduring** Word of God — a **divine diagnostic** by which every church in every age can discern their true spiritual condition.

I want to start our study of this fourth letter with two groups of questions.

First Group:

How would you reply if I walked up to you and asked you, “Are you a tolerant person?”

How would you reply if Jesus walked up to you and asked you, “Are you tolerant?”

Second Group:

Is Jesus tolerant?

What did Jesus tolerate?

Think about this — Jesus is the one of whom the angels declared in Isaiah 6 — *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord*. He left the glory and perfection of heaven and stepped into our broken world. To just BE HERE required that He tolerate everything. The way Jesus treated the world that was in utter rebellion against Him doesn't look like the way many of his followers treat that same world. Alistair Begg made this observation about the book of Daniel

“you will search in vain through the whole book that bears his name for one of God’s people responding aggressively, angrily or condescendingly to any pagan. We know that there is a God who has revealed himself in his Son, and who, through that Son, has brought about the kingdom that cannot be extinguished or overthrown.”¹

In light of that, you might ask — Well then, why does Jesus have a problem with Thyatira being tolerant?

It's no small thing to note that Jesus wrote **the longest** of these seven to the church in the **smallest** city. The question of tolerance was at the center of what Jesus had to say to the church in Thyatira — and remember — His words to them speak to all believers and all churches throughout the ages.

What a timely word! The issues of “tolerance” and “intolerance” are coming like a tsunami at the followers of Jesus. As followers of Jesus, it's imperative that we must know how to respond to the question of tolerance!

John Stott points out that when it comes to this thing called “tolerance” people don't always stop to define what they mean by it.

It may help if we distinguish between three kinds [of tolerance]. The first may be called legal tolerance, which ensures that every minority’s religious and political rights ... are adequately protected in law. This is obviously right ... Another kind is social tolerance, which encourages respect for all persons, whatever views they may hold, and seeks to understand and appreciate their position. This too is a virtue which Christians wish to cultivate ...

¹ Alistair Begg, Brave by Faith

*“But what about intellectual tolerance, which is the third kind? To cultivate a mind so broad that it can tolerate every opinion, without ever detecting anything in it to reject, is not a virtue; it is the vice of the feeble-minded. **It can degenerate into an unprincipled confusion of truth with error and goodness with evil. Christians, who believe that truth and goodness have been revealed in Christ, cannot possibly come to terms with it [error and evil].”** ²*

THAT is why Jesus wrote the longest to the smallest church — The one who is King of the Kingdom, the Head of the Body of Christ and the Chief Shepherd of the flock He laid down His life for **must** address this matter.

There isn't a lot of historical information available to us about the city of Thyatira. But the small bit that is available is enough to help us see what happened to this church.

Thyatira didn't have the coastal beauty of Ephesus or Smyrna. It wasn't the center of Caesar worship like Pergamum. It really didn't hold a candle to the glory of the rest of the seven cities yet to come. Listen to the way the Roman statesman Pliny the Elder dismissed Thyatira with a single phrase — *“Thyatira and other unimportant cities.* Thyatira was an unimportant city with a very important problem!”

Thyatira was located in the Lychus Valley along the Lychus River. It was situated on a trade route established by Selucus (one of Alexander the Great's four generals) around 300 BC and was more or less the gateway to the great city of Pergamum.

Thyatira was a city of craftsmen and merchants.³ Name this Bible character:

She was born in Thyatira — She later made her home in Philippi

² John Stott ; Authentic Christianity, page 69

³ Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994). [Revelation](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1430). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

She was the first European we know of to follow Jesus

She made her living in a particularly lucrative branch of the clothing industry — her favorite color was purple???

[**Lydia**, Acts 16:14]

Purple was a color obtained from the secretion of a species of shell-fish (the *Murex Trunculus*) which was found in the Mediterranean, and particularly on the coasts of Phoenicia and Asia Minor. The coloring substance in each separate shell-fish amounted to only a single drop — and for that reason the dye was incredibly valuable. Robes of this color were worn by kings.

I say all of *that* to say *this*: The economy of Thyatira gave birth to numerous trade guilds in the city. A guild was a group of workers in a similar craft. There were guilds of workers in wool, wood, leather, linen, bronze, makers of outer garments, dyers, potters, bakers, and even slave-dealers. They would collaborate and cooperate in their craft. But it went beyond that. If you were sick or needed assistance, your guild would be there for you. It was like a trade union, group insurance and your community all rolled up in one! The draw to the guilds and their meetings was powerful. Membership in those trade guilds was a matter of life or death for the tradesmen

William Barclay — *“No merchant or trader could hope to prosper or make money unless he was a member of his trade guild.”*

THAT problem was at the heart of the problem Jesus had to address.

Revelation 2:18 (ESV) The words of the Son of God,

This is the only place in the book of Revelation that we find this title: *Son of God*.

Jesus wanted them to know that they were hearing the words of the Son of God! Did we come this morning with that in mind? Are we hearing these words, hanging on these words like those who know that these are the very words of the Son of God?

Here's what is so healthy about Metro: We study the Word of God because in it we are hearing the words of the Son of God — Jesus — and whoever stands at this pulpit is only as valuable as they are faithful to the Word of God!

The Son of God is the one speaking — and He wants them to know that He has

Revelation 2:18 (ESV) eyes like a flame of fire,

This is taken from John's vision of Jesus in Chapter 1 in the last part of verse 14 and the first part of verse 15.

REMEMBER — Jesus selects a unique element of John's vision of Him in Chapter one by which He introduces Himself to each church — because that specific element of His character reveals the specific needs of each church.

Eyes like a flame of fire means that Jesus wants this church to know that He sees ALL things and in the church in Thyatira He saw that some in that church were committing sins in the dark.

HERE'S THE DEAL — Jesus sees all of our hidden sin! We might successfully hide our sin from our spouses, from our kids, from one another at church, but Jesus sees all of them!

and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

Bronze is a strong metal and very resistant to corrosion. Jesus is strong, immovable, unchanging: sovereign and powerful!

Here's the composite of what He wants the church in Thyatira to know about Him: He sees all things, and He cannot be moved!

When we look around at modern church culture, this is NOT the way they think of Jesus.

Jesus is the Lamb of God and the Lion of Judah! Jesus wants this specific church to be aware of His might, His majesty, His justice and His holiness! Sin cannot be hidden from our Him! He will not be defeated or conquered or moved! He is

ruling and reigning over the universe! Even now, His eyes are blazing. He sees both the commendable, and the sin in the church at Thyatira!

Revelation 2:19 (ESV) ¹⁹“ I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

I know how you have lived your lives. **I know** that you love one another and are loyal to me. **I know** the way you have helped one another, and your ability to endure. **I know** that you are now doing more than when you first believed in me (became my followers).⁴

Somewhere along the line American Christianity has been given the notion that because we are saved by grace alone through faith alone that good works somehow have nothing to do with the Gospel.

Jesus doesn't just save us **from something**, He also saves us **to something**

Titus 2:14 (NLT) ¹⁴He gave his life to free us *from* every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and *to make us* his very own people, **totally committed to doing good deeds.**

Jesus saved us to a life of works, love, faith, service, patient endurance — and we should be **growing** in those! THAT was the church in Thyatira. *I know that you are now doing more than when you first believed in me (became my followers).*⁵

Jesus was speaking to working, loving, faithful, serving, enduring, growing Christians!

This church was marked by great works! Would Jesus commend the works of Metro?

This church was marked by love for one another! Would Jesus commend our love?

⁴ Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993). A handbook on the Revelation to John (p. 58). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁵ Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993). [*A handbook on the Revelation to John*](#) (p. 58). New York: United Bible Societies.

This church was marked by great faith in Jesus and great faithfulness to Him!
Would Jesus commend our faith?!

This church was a serving Church. They were serving one another, as Jesus served them. They understood that following Jesus means that no one gets to stand on the sidelines while a handful of people do most of the work. (commend the many who have said they're ready to serve in the process of the move and serve weekly).

HERE'S THE DEAL — A Christian is someone who follows the God who fully joined Himself with our humanity — came into our world — not to be served but to serve. Question: Are we serving — in any way? Is your life, my life, marked by service to others?

This Church was enduring pain and suffering. How are we doing on enduring until Jesus comes?

ARE WE growing in these areas of love and faith and service?!

Have YOU grown in your walk with Jesus this past year?!

Jesus has much to commend about this church! BUT — He doesn't stop there **because** while this church was getting it right in so many ways, Jesus has something against them!

Revelation 2:20 (ESV) ²⁰**But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel,**

They didn't respectfully differ with this woman.

***Revelation 2:20 (NLT)** "But I have this complaint against you. You are **permitting** that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray.*

DON'T MISS THIS — Tolerance in the wrong direction = permission, endorsing something the Bible does not. And THAT matters to Jesus.

Let's look at the someone and the something that they permitted.

That woman Jezebel — Jesus is talking about a literal woman in that church. Jezebel might not have been the actual name of this woman. Jezebel is the most notorious and infamous woman in the Bible. She was so patently wicked that virtually no one names their daughter Jezebel. In my 39 years of pastoral ministry, I've *never* dedicated a little girl named "Jezebel."

Jezebel was the wife of perhaps the most wicked of the many wicked kings of the Northern kingdom of Israel — Ahab. She enticed the ten northern tribes of Israel to worship YHWH **and** Baal. She subsidized 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Ashtarte (1 Kings 18:19).

This woman in the church in Thyatira was leading men and women within the church away from the worship of the true and living God, so Jesus refers to her as *that woman — that Jezebel*.

who calls herself a prophetess — She claimed that her teaching was an authentic message from God. We could read this as

"who falsely says she is a prophet,"

"who lies when she says that her message comes from God."⁶

Here's the litmus test for who is speaking from God: A true prophet of God leads the people of God towards holiness and righteousness! If a person claims to be a prophet but their words are leading people to sin — they cannot be speaking truth.

HUGE QUESTION — How did some of those faithful, loving, serving Christians end up permitting this woman to teach things that were false and lead Christians away from Jesus? The social and cultural context of the city of Thyatira helps us see how this woman gained such a foothold in the church in Thyatira and how tolerance morphed into outright compliance and participation in sin.

and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

⁶ Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993). A handbook on the Revelation to John (p. 58). New York: United Bible Societies.

This woman didn't come out and say — I have a word from the Lord! He wants you to worship idols and commit sexual sin!

No! Remember the power and pressure to belong to a trade guild. Each of those guilds held gatherings! It was even common for those meetings to be held in the temple of a pagan god. Regardless of the location, during these gatherings they would eat meat that had been sacrificed to the pagan god that was the “patron” of that specific trade and those specific tradesmen. It was an act of worship to these gods! The meeting would eventually devolve into all sorts of sexual immorality!

You might be thinking — “Well if I knew that was going to happen I'd never go in the first place!” Remember — You were committing economic suicide if you rejected the minimum requirements for guild membership

Imagine you were a seller of Purple Cloth. You meet Lydia, the woman who got led to faith in Jesus by the apostle Paul while on a business trip in Philippi. Lydia tells you about Jesus — and you give your life to Jesus.

Not long after getting saved your next guild gathering comes along, and you know what's going to happen there. What do you do?! Do you go? Do you not go and lose your guild membership? You know that losing your guild membership would be tantamount to economic suicide.

THAT was facing the church in Thyatira!

Enter Jezebel! After gathering with the brothers and sisters you start to share with them your struggle concerning the upcoming guild meeting and someone asks if you've met Jezebel yet. You say, *No, why? Who is she?*

They tell you that Jezebel is a prophetess — and God has told her that because we're forgiven by Jesus, we are free to worship Jesus, and be a part of a guild and participate in what everyone else does in their meetings. Jezebel says that the Lord told her that “Christians can have both — in fact, she's having a meeting at her house as soon as we're finished here and she's going to teach more about this!”

Tolerance listens to what a person claims as truth — brings it before the supreme court of the Scriptures — and if that thing doesn't line up with the truth of Scripture you clearly, yet respectfully, reject that person's idea.

THAT is **not** what the church in Thyatira did when it came to Jezebel.

They allowed her / permitted her — they did not forbid her / did not put a stop to / did not prevent her from teaching such things and leading servants of Jesus astray. And we can see social and economic pressures that were working on them and against them.

What are the things that are working on you and against you, causing you to tolerate, to permit, to not put a stop to idolatry (putting something in the place of Jesus) or doing things God calls sin.

DON'T MISS THIS — This is the one sin that the **entire church** was guilty of.

Revelation 2:20 (NLT) ²⁰“But I have this complaint against you. **You are permitting that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray. She teaches them to commit sexual sin and to eat food offered to idols.**

“**You**” is plural. Not all believed the teachings of Jezebel to be true. Not all in the church practiced idolatry and sexual sin. But the church was guilty of tolerating it! They permitted her to corrupt the **servants** of Jesus — permitted her to corrupt men and women that Jesus redeemed with His blood!

What Jesus says next is mind blowing!

Revelation 2:21 (ESV) ²¹I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

Jesus' strongest condemnation is that this “Jezebel” did not repent. She apparently rejected the work of the Holy Spirit in her heart, calling her to repentance.

We see two things here

1. We see the **MERCY** of Jesus — He gives her time to repent. **WOW!!**

Jesus calls all of us — even the worst of us, in the worst of sins — to repent!

There is hope for forgiveness and healing, even for this person who was clearly leading others astray. In

2 Peter 3:9b “The Lord...is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”

God gives **us** time to repent — we should deal with others the same way.

2. We see the JUDGMENT of Jesus —

The judgment of Jesus fits perfectly with the way Jesus introduced Himself to this church as the Son of God who has eyes like flaming fire. Jesus is the judge of all because He is the knower of all hearts.

God gives time to repent — but it is not an unlimited time. When God gives us time to repent, take advantage of that time.

Revelation 2:22 (ESV) ²²Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed,

Literally — “I throw her on a bed.” The Revised English Bible translates it as “a bed of pain.” Jesus was going to punish her by way of an illness — and the tense of the verb Jesus uses means that He was going to do it soon.

and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works,

William Barclay — “unless they realize how wrong her conduct is, and stop participating in it.”⁷

Revelation 2:23 (ESV) ²³and I will strike her children dead. And (by way of my judging them) 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.

⁷ Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993). A handbook on the Revelation to John (p. 60). New York: United Bible Societies.

Revelation 2:24–29 (ESV) ²⁴But 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,

Though the whole church in Thyatira was rebuked by Jesus for tolerating the teaching of this woman, not everyone followed and practiced the things she taught.

to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. ²⁵Only hold fast what you have until I come.

Jesus commended them for what they did have. They had a life of works, love, faith, service, and patient endurance. Jesus told them to hold fast to all of that. Jesus did not want them to be distracted or discouraged from who He saved them to be and what He saved them to do **even if** it meant facing radical economic persecution for refusing to worship idols and commit sexual sin.

Friends — Jesus is saying that we **can** live for Him in a broken world — and even a broken church. Jesus did all the heavy lifting! He defeated Satan, Sin, and Death on the cross! So ultimately He was telling them — and us — to hold fast to Him!

I love the words of Samwise Gamgee to Frodo in Lord of the Rings! — “Don’t you let go!”

Jesus also told them *how long* to **hold fast**

Until I come!

Christians can overcome and keep Jesus’ works until the end.

²⁶The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

John Walvoord — *“The word rule literally means “to shepherd.” Their rule will not be simply that of executing judgment, but also that of administering mercy and direction.”*

28 And I will give him the morning star.

Life Application Bible — “A morning star appears just before dawn, when things are coldest and darkest.”

Jesus himself is the morning star! Jesus himself is our ultimate reward!

Genesis 15:1 (NKJV) ¹After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

Jesus Himself is more than the perfection of the new heaven and new earth; more than the absence of suffering in the new heaven and new earth; more than being forever re-united with friends and family who have gone before us; more than all the rewards offered there! I love this verse of the old hymn “The Sands of Time of Time Are Sinking”

*The bride eyes not her garment, But her dear Bridegroom’s face;
I will not gaze at glory — But on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth — But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory Of Emmanuel’s land.*

Jesus himself is the fountainhead from which all blessings and gifts flow. Jesus is the source! Jesus is our reward!

29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Perhaps you’ve been far too critical of the world, and far too tolerant of your own sin.

Perhaps you been deceived, and you have believed the lie that it’s okay to put someone or something else in the place of Jesus. Lots of that going on these days!

If you are walking with Jesus, hold fast. Don’t quit. He is coming soon!

All of us, let’s come to Jesus. He is gracious. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love to all of us. He poured out his blood for us. Let’s come to him now!