

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

THE CHURCH THAT FLIRTS WITH DANGER

By Tom Cowan

(SHOW TITLE VIDEO as Tom walks up) If you do any work on the internet – you know what happens as you scroll down a document or a page – when your cursor crosses a word/phrase that is highlighted in some way – it means that other information is available to you – so when you click on that word/phrase – another page of background or clarification opens up to you.

So I would like you to imagine reading this week's passage – Revelation 2:18-29 as though we were reading it on the internet – and there are several words/phrases that are highlighted – when we get to them – we will double click and see what other background/information comes up.

The first word that we double click on is **Thyatira** – another screen opens up to give us some background about the city that will be important to understand.

Thyatira was the gateway to Pergamum, the capital city. Its function as a city was to fight a delaying action until Pergamum was able to get organized and fight back. So it was a city fated to fight, lose, be captured, destroyed and later to be rebuilt.

Another important aspect about this city was --

Associated with its commerce was an extensive trade guild or labor union network, which must have played a prominent role in the social, political, economic, and religious life of the city. Each guild had its own patron deity, feasts, and seasonal festivities that included sexual revelries.

William Barclay also gives us some background and insight into this situation – and what it would mean for Christian merchants.

The social activities of these trade-guilds were intimately bound up with the worship of the heathen gods. These trade-guilds had common meals together. The meal would begin and end with a cup of wine poured out as a libation and an offering to the gods. It was, in fact, the heathen grace before and after meat. Could a Christian join in a ceremony like that? Still further, such a meal would

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

almost certainly follow a sacrifice. The token part of the animal would be offered on the altar. The meat of it would be given to the worshipper to make a feast for the members of his trade-guild.

So the question was -- Could a Christian sit and eat *meat which had been offered to idols*? Could he partake of a meal where the meat had already been offered to Apollo or Artemis? Still further, these trade-guilds feasts not infrequently degenerated into carousals, where drunkenness and immorality were the order of the day. Could a Christian participate in a feast where drunkenness and sex were the accepted things?

There is obviously a very real problem here in terms of economics. If in Thyatira the Christian merchant or trader or craftsman was a member of his trade-guild, and participated in its ceremonies, he would protect his business interests and ensure his material prosperity; if he refused to become a member of such a guild and refused to participate in its ceremonies, he was definitely committing economic/commercial suicide and would very soon be faced with poverty, and even bankruptcy.

So we read on – the next phrase we stop at is verse 19.

(SHOW SLIDE 01) *I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.*

So imagine a new window opening up – telling us that there are 6 things this church is commended for. **(SHOW SLIDE 02)** hold slide until 6 -- Last quality

1 -- Deeds – this church worked hard.

2 -- Love – this is where the Ephesian church had failed.

3 -- Faith – they kept the truth.

4 -- Service – the word is diakonia – gives us deacons.

5 -- perseverance – they did not quit when the going got tough. There are two words in the NT text for patience/perseverance – each used in different contexts.

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

One word is always used for patience/ perseverance/endurance with difficult situations. That's the word used here. The other word always means patience with difficult people.

6 -- Last quality – you are doing more now than you did at first. This church does not just do more of the same. They are finding new ways of stretching forward. They are taking initiative and were enterprising in regard to ministry.

Even in the context of some of the struggles facing them -- this sounds like a pretty good church to be part of!

But we read on -- we come to another word that is highlighted – we double click on the word **Jezebel** and open another window. It seems that a woman – a Jezebel – was corrupting the church.

This takes us back into the Old Testament to find a real person called Jezebel.

We need to go back and see who Jezebel was in the Old Testament. We find her back in 1 and 2 Kings. She was the Canaanite wife of King Ahab. She influenced Ahab to worship Baal and to turn away from God.

Not only did she lead Ahab into worshipping the false gods of Baal but, through Ahab, she preached her false teachings and idolatry throughout Israel. She had many true prophets killed – and Jezebel and Elijah had some serious confrontation.

So she is a real person in the Old Testament – there may have been a real person called Jezebel in this church – there is the suggestion that she was the wife of the bishop of the church -- or her name may be used in a metaphorical sense – in a symbolic way or figurative way. We are not sure – and that is not important to us. What is important is that someone – in this case a woman – is influencing both the teaching and also how people are behaving. She claimed to have some deep truths that no one else had and this is what she was teaching.

(SHOW SLIDE 03) Verse 24 -- ... to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not yet learned Satan's so called deep secrets ... only hold on to what you have until I come.

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

The point is that this woman and what she is teaching are influencing many in the church away from the truth.

So with this background – what does this say to our lives and to the church today? What are the dangers and temptations we face.

(SHOW SLIDE 04) First one is – what we will call COMPARTMENTALIZATION – this is the answer to how to live in a city filled with the trade guilds. You just divide your life into several compartments – there is your worship compartment – then your work compartment – then your civic compartment – another compartment for your family life -- and you can have a different set of rules or ethics in each one – just don't let them meet each other.

(SHOW SLIDE DIAGRAM 05)

Compartmentalization is the illusion we play which is called both/and. We want both /and. It means that we can be one person at church – another at home - another at work – at an office party - another with friends and so on. It is Both/and.

This denies the fact that our Christian lives have to be integrated – remember what an integer is – an integer is a whole number. But our lives cannot be divided like the segments of a grapefruit – rather we live homogenized lives – all mixed up together.

So we need to live from a different viewpoint – actually an entirely different way of thinking.

(SHOW SLIDE DIAGRAM 06)

This means that we place the Lordship of Jesus at the centre of our lives – **(SHOW SLIDE DIAGRAM 07)**. His word – his rule – his mind is to spread out into every facet and part of our lives – this is what gives us integrity.

The spirit of Jezebel is still very much with us – the spirit of her Baal worship is still very much with us – no one uses the name Baal – but it is still the controlling spirit of the public square. So many times it cannot be both/and – it is either/or. So our

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

question is – how do we remain loyal to Christ in the market place? IT is not easy – it has never been easy.

This leads to our old familiar enemy in these letters -- COMPROMISE – as we have seen before – grace and truth are silently eroded – the power of our faith silently declines.

Behind this struggle we need to ask – how can one person have so much influence over a church – over this group of people? How does this happen? Can that happen today – and the answer is most certainly -- yes!

It begins with what I will call -- **(SHOW SLIDE 08)** THE CULT OF THE CELEBRITY.

Why had one woman's voice – by the way, it could easily have been a man's voice – risen about the sanctified common sense of the congregation? Why had a solo voice been heard and followed above the symphony of the people of God?

It was because the church had allowed itself to slip into what we will call the cult of the personality or the cult of the celebrity.

Alistair McGrath – British theologian raises some thoughtful issues and questions –
The rise of tele-evangelism and preaching ministries has led to a growing cult of personality within evangelism. He says – it is often not what the Scriptures teach that really matters – but what this celebrity has to share with me about his or her experience or insights. Often, Scripture is ignored altogether; it is what God is saying directly to this preacher that counts.

That may sound somewhat harsh and severe – but it contains a serious warning. It is what I call the cult of the celebrity.

But we need to ask some better and deeper questions – is there a danger that the word of the Christian celebrity or experience of the Christian personality can begin to take on weight and a force even above the Word of God? When this happens – it is sometimes because of the authority and influence that we give to them. We elevate them and place them on a spiritual platform.

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

We need to ask -- Does our understanding of the world of the spiritual come from Scripture – or from the writings of Frank Peretti?

Does our eschatology and our preparation for Christ's return rise from the pages of Scripture – or from the fictional writing of two men who wrote the runaway best sellers that are in the Left Behind series? Please realize – they are writing fiction – and it is based on only one way of understanding the potential events of the eschaton.

I am well aware that I often read and quote other people – but I have to do so carefully -- I use their names not to exalt them but to learn from them - - we have to read what they have to say to the Body of Christ/ the church at large – but I raise their names to ask us – are there ways in which we can fall into and worship the cult of the celebrity? Is something more right and has it more authority if the person who says so has a publicly approved name?

The easy access to media today – and the speed of media makes us vulnerable in a new and almost scary way to the cult of the celebrity and the power of the personality. If we are not careful – we will make Christian leaders into celebrities – and even into a kind of papacy of preachers.

There is a counter-balance to this which helps and protects both the leaders and the people alike – it is an old truth that the reformers discovered early in the 16th century.

One of the great discoveries of the Reformation was the truth that the Scriptures were the music of God written not just for a few star performers and guest celebrities – but for the benefit and blessing of the whole orchestra – which is the gathered church.

It is the reformation principle of the public accountability of the Word of God – it is the right and the responsibility of ALL believers to read and to interpret Scripture – it is not the sole domain of a few experts and celebrities. The congregation can and must challenge pastors when they appear to deny it – depart from it – add to it or subtract from it.

The most important thing we can do is to build a strong healthy community of Christ.

The counterbalance to the cult of the celebrity is the community of the people – each possessing the right and the responsibility to read – to study – to interpret and to

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

reflect on the meaning of Scripture. That is why you need to bring your Bible and to have it open as I preach – you are holding me accountable. No guilt here – just a challenge/encouragement -- but it seems to me that we have gotten out of the habit of bringing our Bibles and opening them as we study.

1st John 4:1 reminds – test the spirits... We can only do that if we can hold their message up against the authority of Scripture.

Also – in the times in which we live – the life and the lifestyles of these Christian leaders must also echo the lifestyle called for in the Scriptures.
It is sad that in the last few years – several large movements in the church which have contributed a lot -- have fallen into disrepute over the exposed sin of their leaders.

It makes you wonder – was there no one who would stand up and speak against this Jezebel and challenge her teaching? In the cult of the celebrity – no one does – because we give the celebrity status. But we are committed to the Word being in the midst of the people. You have a great responsibility as the people of God.

(SHOW SLIDE 09) THE SEDUCTION OF POWER.

You may know Lord Acton's well known adage – *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

Prophets and leaders have power – the power to lead and the power to influence – false prophets and false leaders also have power and influence.

We would do well to remember that the sin in the garden was the sin of power – you shall be as god – the seduction of power has always been one of Satan's most effective tools. Power becomes a tool to control rather than to serve – to dominate rather than to bring blessings.

Archbishop of Canterbury – at recent coronation – spoke about the real reason for power was to serve.

The risk and the danger is that power that is selfish and corrupt seldom looks different on the outside from power that is true – legitimate and genuine. As always the

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

difference lies in the heart and that is harder if not impossible for us to see – that is why Jesus who is the Son of God speaks to this church in Thyatira as the one who has eyes of blazing fire – in other words he has the ability and the insight to see things as they really are.

We need to discern the great difference between the gospel of power and the power of the gospel. The gospel of power is found in experience rather than in the word of God. Just because a Christian and particularly a Christian leader claims to have an experience does not necessarily make it a Christian experience. People who seek and follow the experience may actually find themselves far from the power of the gospel and not even know it.

When we lose sight of the public and objective character of the Scriptures – we are defenseless against the power of the personality and we will become easy prey to the seduction of power – especially when someone says “God told me this --- “ or “I have a personal revelation from God about this truth.” That is what Revelation calls the deep secrets – which may in fact turn out to be the deep secrets of Satan.

We need to realize that the closer someone claims to know God and the deep things of God and his power -- the closer they may also be towards the centre of error.

Once again – the Reformation enables ordinary Christians to blow the whistle on their leaders and to examine the heart of their power.

We need to watch people with power very carefully – we need to see if the people who say they have spiritual power are also willing to get down on their knees and serve people. The kingdom of God is about power – but it is the power to serve and to change lives – it is about the power of righteousness and peace – it is about the grain of mustard seed – it is about the power of the Lamb.

(SHOW SLIDE 10) THE ABDICATION OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.

What I means by this is that somewhere along the line when things go off the rails – and coupled with the seduction of power – it seems that some people are willing to transfer what they need to know and where they get their knowledge from -- from themselves to someone else. This is the abdication of personal responsibility.

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

It is the abdication of the personal responsibility to do our own thinking – to reach our own analysis – to develop our own critical judgement – and we transfer the responsibility that is ours for these things to someone else.

They think for us – they decide for us – they digest for us. We simply receive their predigested answers and responses.

There are at least two major areas in our lives in which we can abdicate personal responsibility.

(SHOW SLIDE 11) 1 – what we believe – doctrinal.

In this area we allow someone else to do our thinking for us – to shape what we think about and ultimately what we believe. We are surrendering the crucial analysis of our lives to someone else. In a legal sense – we allow them to become our power of attorney.

Since someone else has done all the thinking for us – we then it is easy assume that we are personally released from any responsibility for our personal actions. This is not the case at all.

(SHOW SLIDE 12) 2 – how we behave – our lifestyle – the moral area.

We allow someone else to shape how we live – we play a deadly game of follow the leader. It is fine to be a follower – followers just have to be very sure of who the leaders are and who they are following.

Sometimes these spiritual gurus call for a lifestyle that requires sacrifice and surrender. They decide what we eat and drink and how we live. We have seen this before tragically with Jim Jones – David Koresh and others.

At other times – these spiritual leaders may decide that certain lifestyles are fine – so in Thyatira with Jezebel – enjoy a prostitute or two – join these trade guilds. That will be good for business – what harm will it do.

We've Got Mail!
Central Baptist – May 28th 2023
Revelation 2:18-29
The Church of Thyatira

This is what I call the silence of our minds – we do not do our own thinking – we allow others to do our thinking – and this is a dangerous step.

If we are to follow anyone – if we are to give anyone celebrity status in our lives -- let it be Jesus! He is not the leader of a cult – he is Saviour Lord and King!

If we are to seek power in our lives – may it be the power of the towel and the cross – these are the true symbols of His power.

If we are to think like anyone – may we learn to think like Jesus – that's why **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** Philippians 2:5 says to us – let this mind – this kind of thinking – be in you which was also in Christ Jesus... Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

The issue is loyalty – it cannot be both/and in our lives – it has to be either/or.

STAND/WORSHIP TEAM UP

Back to dragging our cursor over a word or phrase. Jesus says – to the one who overcomes I will give the morning star.

The first morning star usually appears at the darkest time of the night – when it appears there may be no sign of the dawn – it is very faint – but the darkness cannot hold back the coming of the dawn – it is just a matter of time until the dawn fights its battle with the night – and the morning star wins!

Jesus uses the term to overcome in all 7 letters. To overcome means to keep His word until the end.

Overcomers are those who are willing to lose – willing to be rejected by their culture – but SURPRISE, SURPRISE - – they end up reigning with the Son of God.