

The Church in Thyatira

Revelation 2:18-29

Introduction

What you see, hear, and say matters.

I once heard a pastor say, “Your eyes and your ears are the gateways into your mind and heart.” That is exactly right. What we allow in shapes what we believe, and what we believe shapes what we say and do. This is one of the reasons God takes very seriously what people say in His name. It is not only what you claim about Him, but how you represent Him before your family, your friends, your neighbors, and your coworkers. Words spoken in God’s name carry eternal weight.

That is why Scripture warns us so clearly:

“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak... that same prophet shall die... when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass... that is a word that the LORD has not spoken” (Deut. 18:20–22).

Jesus added His own warning:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves... You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:15–17).

And then there is this sobering word for anyone who teaches the Bible:

“Not many of you should become teachers... for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1).

You had better be certain that God has spoken before you claim to speak for Him. To say, “God told me,” when He did not tell you—to claim divine authority where there is none—is no small matter. It is to speak falsely in His name. And that is exactly what was happening in Thyatira. The woman Jesus calls “Jezebel” stands as a warning—not only to false teachers, but to any church willing to tolerate them.

The Idolatry of Thyatira (v. 18)

Thyatira was not a political capital like Ephesus or Pergamum. It was a working-class trade city, known for its guilds—wool workers, bronze craftsmen, bakers, potters, tanners, leather-cutters, and especially merchants of purple dye derived from the murex mollusk, a dye that was exceptionally expensive and rare. Economic and religious life were tightly intertwined.

Belonging to a guild meant participating in pagan feasts and immoral practices. For a Christian, refusing to participate could cost employment, reputation, and stability. In a city like that, compromise did not look rebellious—it looked reasonable. It looked practical.

Jesus reveals Himself as the Son of God, with eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze. The people of Thyatira knew fire. They were familiar with the heat of the kiln, where clay was hardened, and with the intense flames required to refine and shape bronze. But the fire in Christ's eyes is not the fire of craftsmanship—it is the fire of perfect vision. His gaze burns through every façade. He sees what is done in secret. He knows every hidden thought. He searches the heart.

And His feet of burnished bronze speak not of artistry but of authority. They embody unshakable strength and sovereign power. Whatever beauty the guilds could forge with their skill, it pales before the majesty and omnipotence of the Son of God who walks among His churches. His authority cannot be molded. His judgment cannot be reshaped. He stands firm, and He sees all.

He sees what a congregation may overlook. He discerns what lies beneath activity and affection. He had given time to repent, but repentance had not come. What the church would not confront, Christ Himself would. And yet, even here, there is mercy. To those who refused compromise, He gives no heavy burden—only this: hold fast until I come. The promise is not comfort in this world but participation in His reign and the gift of the Morning Star—Christ Himself. Thyatira reminds us that love without truth becomes dangerous, and tolerance without repentance becomes poison. Christ calls His church not merely to grow but to remain holy.

We will consider what this church did right before we look at Jesus' rebuke for what they did wrong.

The Good that the Church Was Doing in Thyatira

This sermon marks the halfway point in this section in Revelation on the seven churches and it would be good for us to pause to make sure we do not miss what it is that Jesus knows about each of the churches:

- The church in Ephesus: “I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance...”
- The church in Smyrna: “I know your tribulation and poverty...”
- The church in Pergamum: “I know where you dwell... Yet you hold fast my name...”
- The church in Sardis: “I know your works. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”
- The church in Philadelphia: “I know your works... and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”
- The church in Laodicea: “I know your works: you are neither hot nor cold...”

There is nowhere in the Old Testament or New Testament where faith is not evidenced by works. The evidence that the Christian has gone from spiritual death to spiritual life in Jesus is that you

who were once dead are now alive! James put it this way: **“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead”** (2:26). In Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, we read these words: **“for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord”** (Eph. 5:8-10).

When a person is alive, there is evidence of life. There is movement. There is hunger. There is a heartbeat and brain activity. Life produces signs of life. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”** (2 Cor. 5:17). To be born again is not merely to adopt new language—it is to possess new life.

Jesus commends the church in Thyatira because their claim to belong to Him was evident. “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance...” (v. 19). Their Christianity was not theoretical—it was observable. Unlike the Ephesian church, which had abandoned its first love, the believers in Thyatira were marked by love—*agapē*. This was not sentimental affection; it was covenantal, self-giving love.

It is the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (vv. 4–7). Their love for God shaped their faith, which expressed itself in service. That service required patient endurance. Even more striking, Jesus says their latter works exceeded the first. This church was growing.

In many ways, Thyatira appears strong. Where Ephesus had abandoned its first love, Thyatira possessed it. Where Pergamum struggled with false teaching, Thyatira held fast to the faith. Like Smyrna, they patiently endured suffering. Yet this letter reminds us that Christian virtues must remain rightly ordered. Love must be joined to truth. Faith must be guarded by discernment. Love leads to service, and faith produces endurance—but if love is not anchored in truth, it can become the very doorway for compromise.¹ For Thyatira, compromise came in the form of tolerating a false teacher within their own congregation.

The Bad that the Church was Ignoring in Thyatira (vv. 20-23)

Before rebuking this church, Jesus affirmed what was good. He did not overlook their love, faith, service, and endurance. But affirmation does not cancel accountability. There was something dangerous in their fellowship—something they were tolerating—and it had become serious enough for Christ to address directly.

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *Revelation*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 122.

Thyatira was a market city composed largely of blue-collar workers and dominated by trade guilds. Each guild honored its own patron deity—Apollo, Artemis, Dionysus, and others. Apollo was associated with prophecy, healing, protection, and civic identity. Artemis with fertility and prosperity. Dionysus with revelry and sexual immorality. Religion and business were inseparable. Syncretism was the norm. Guild feasts involved food sacrificed to idols and immoral practices. Refusing participation could mean losing income and stability. Faithfulness to Christ could cost you your livelihood. It was not impossible to remain faithful—Lydia proves that (Acts 16:14–15)—but it was not easy.

In that environment arose a woman Jesus calls “Jezebel.” She claimed prophetic authority and was leading some in the congregation into sexual immorality and idolatry. The name is deliberate. The original Jezebel, the wife of Ahab (1 Ki. 16; 21), promoted Baal worship, incited rebellion against the Lord, and led Israel into detestable practices. Scripture says there was none like Ahab, “whom Jezebel his wife incited” (1 Ki. 21:25–26). Her life ended in humiliating judgment (2 Ki. 9). That name carries the weight of corruption and divine reckoning.

And now Jesus says to this church, “**You tolerate that woman Jezebel**” (v. 20). The easy thing to do is to avoid conflict by ignoring sin. But ignoring sin never solves the problem—it only allows it to spread. Christ gave her time to repent, but she refused (v. 21). The church had a responsibility to confront her influence, yet they tolerated it and endangered the flock.

So Jesus announces judgment: “**Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed... and I will strike her children dead**” (vv. 22–23). The One who searches mind and heart will not allow corruption within His church to go unchecked. Christ is patient—but His patience has limits.

Conclusion

After addressing Jezebel and those who followed her, Jesus turns to His faithful servants: “**But to the rest of you in Thyatira... I do not lay on you any other burden**” (v. 24). That is mercy. He does not overwhelm them with new demands or complicate obedience. He simply says, “**Only hold fast what you have until I come**” (v. 25). In a city where compromise promised security and faithfulness threatened their future, following Jesus was costly. To hold fast meant loving Christ more than comfort and valuing truth more than stability.

Then comes the promise: “**The one who conquers... I will give authority over the nations**” (vv. 26–27). The world may reward compromise for a moment, but Christ rewards faithfulness forever. Those who overcome will share in His reign (v. 27; Ps. 2). The ones who seemed small in Thyatira will one day rule with the King.

And then this: “**I will give him the morning star**” (v. 28). Later, Jesus identifies Himself as the Morning Star (Rev. 22:16). The reward is not merely relief from pressure. It is not merely future authority. It is Christ Himself. The world offers comfort through compromise. Christ offers Himself through endurance.