

Thyatira

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[0 : 00] I think in the day and age in which we live, certainly the younger generation here will not appreciate what it is to get a letter. Because it's the age of instant communication.

You know, you're not out of the building and you'll hear what's happened somewhere else in the country, just because of email and texts and everything else.

I just love getting letters. Don't get any letters these days. I remember the first love letters I had, treasured them precious. They weren't from Katrina, I think.

But I haven't kept them, you'll be glad to know. But, you know, they were each too long for them. Any letters from someone you love, because that was the way we communicated.

That was how we found out things. And maybe we've lost that sense of excitement at getting letters, because it doesn't happen quite so much today. But there's an excitement, even for us today, as we read God's word, because this is one of His letters.

[1 : 03] And it was His letter directly given to a church, one of the early churches in that crescent shape of churches in Asia. But nonetheless remains a living letter for ourselves as the Church of Christ, because He's a living, resurrected Saviour, and it still speaks to us about the kind of things He challenges us as individuals, but within the church context.

So it challenges us as a church as well as individuals. And so we find that not only are we excited to hear about what Jesus is saying, the Lord Jesus is saying to us, but also it tells us, you know, if you get a letter from someone, you learn a lot about them, you know, because they reveal themselves in a letter, don't they?

People, sometimes it's easier to reveal yourself but more in a letter than it is face to face. We can be more open in a sense. Now, I'm not saying that's necessarily the case with Jesus, but we certainly do learn about Him in these letters.

We learn His character, His Lordship, His nature, and what He wants for us as Christians, as believers. And as with most of the letters that He writes, He begins with a word of encouragement to them.

I know your deeds in verse 19. I know your love, your faith, your service, and your perseverance, and that you now are doing more than you did at first.

[2 : 26] Now, if you've been here for any of the other sermons, you'll maybe recognize something in there from one of the other ones. Because in the first letter, He challenged them about not loving the way that they did at first, that they had fallen from their first love and they weren't serving in the way that they were at the beginning.

And here is quite the opposite, the church in Thyatira. We don't know much about Thyatira. It was a small place. It seemed to be a very commercial place. There was a lot of things happening, a lot of work, trades and guilds and things like that.

But it's not a particularly memorable place. But nonetheless, this small church, this small body of believers here, seemed to get a pretty good report card, as it were, in their faith and in their life.

I mean, you'd be happy with this, wouldn't you? I would be certainly happy with Christ saying that as He looks and as He sees them living as a Christian church in Thyatira, in that secular and pagan city or town, He says, I can see you.

I can see you're doing more for the kingdom now than you did when you first believed. That's great. He says, I know about your love. Something again that the Ephesus church had fallen from.

[3 : 36] You've fallen from your first love. But He said, no, they kept that love for Christ and for His people. Their faith, their service, they were working. They were continuing to serve the Lord.

And they were persevering. They weren't giving up. And there was lots of reasons for them, maybe, to give up. Lots of challenges to give up. So you see these four things, love and faith and service

and perseverance, you think, that's pretty good. There can't be much going wrong with that church. They really seem to have got the core truth, the core message, the core Christian standard of living. They're dependent on God and they're trusting in God and they're relying on God in their lives. And that's good. He gives them that encouragement. And these are things that we should be encouraged to develop and grow and mature in our own Christian lives and in our own churches. And their significant God mentions them here. It's important that we love. It's important that we develop our faith. It's important that we serve. It's important that we persevere. It's important that we develop so that we're doing more than we did at the beginning.

[4 : 41] And there's a growth. There's a steadying. There's a moving forward in our Christian lives. All these things are important and it's good. As we examine ourselves in the light of Jesus Christ speaking, I hope we're encouraged to do the same things ourselves.

And encouraged when we see these things in the congregation and we see them in our own lives. So be encouraged by that and think about these things and develop them in your life as I must in mine.

So Jesus here is a letter. We have found out his words of encouragement. And that's great. And that's good. Important. But we also see his eyes, the eyes of Rebuke here in many ways. He speaks words of encouragement, but there's eyes that are like blazing fire. See, these are the words of the Son of God. Whose eyes are like blazing fire.

And then in verse 20, he goes on to express a major failing, maybe it's the word, a major challenge that they need to address in their Christian church.

[5 : 53] I have this against you. Tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she leads many servants into sexual immorality and eating the food sacrificed to idols.

Now whether this was an actual woman called Jezebel or whether it's just a kind of symbolic name that's given to a prophetess in the congregation, it seems to be a self-appointed prophetess in the congregation, linking it with the Old Testament queen who was known for the same kind of idolatry and immorality is unclear.

But she certainly had involved herself in the life of the congregation and was teaching in such a way that was encouraging compromise with society around them and a loosening of moral rectitude, a loosening of moral standards.

And Jesus always is hugely honest with his church and with his people. And he can't help but be honest because his eyes see.

His eyes of blazing fire, they're penetrating. And he searches out the impurity within the church. And he does that in order to bring the people back to himself.

[7 : 14] As we've seen again and again in the pattern of the message to these churches and elsewhere in Scripture, God's task, the Spirit's task, Jesus' task is exposing, revealing the things within us that are corruptible and that are deadly for our good and for our souls.

And we're thankful to him for that. It's not easy. Sometimes we would rather not, because we sense his blazing gaze. We sense his eyes and they go deep, you know.

And sometimes that pain, while being a healing pain, is nonetheless a real one. And we struggle with it. As you know, a couple of months ago, I was in hospital getting my knee fixed ligament problems from many years of kicking young boys in the football park too hard and missing the ball. And that was fine. I could manage to cope with that. I got the operation. But then about three or four, six or seven weeks after that, I haven't gone back to play.

I completely ruptured my other knee, the only good one I'd left. And I should really have gone to see about that. But I was scared.

[8 : 38] Still am. Scared of the doctor's response. Why are you going back to football when you were told not to? And scared of wasting their time because it's not, you know, a serious injury in the sense that people are much more worthy of getting an operation and much more need it.

But I'm scared. You're scared sometimes of going to get the X-ray, which will reveal the damage, partly because you know it may take a great deal of reconstruction to get it right again. And so you somehow stick your head in the sand and hope that it will go away.

And we can be like that spiritually, you know. We can sometimes rather not deal with the issues in hand in our lives and the light of God exposing our sins because we recognize that there's a sense of guilt sometimes within us.

There's also a sense of recognizing the cost of putting that right in terms of our lives. But we do know that it's good that He does that because He wants to bring healing and wholeness. And that's the hope and the reality that these blazing eyes which bring with them a rebuke to the church are doing.

[10:02] He didn't want this church to tolerate this teaching that was coming through this prophetess Jezebel because it was damaging to the church, hugely damaging to the church.

These trade guilds, there seem to be in Tyre Tyre, trade guilds that were related to all the different trades in the city. And they all had their own gods, they all had their own feasts that they went to and at these feasts they all engaged in the sexual abandonment that went with drunkenness and everything else in that time and place.

And if you became a Christian then you distanced yourself from that and from that standard of living and that standard of morality. And with every possibility you lost your job, you lost your contacts, you lost the source of income for your family and you consigned yourself to poverty and isolation and ostracisation from the community because these were all embracing and powerful and strong. And it seemed to be that the teaching of Jezebel and others was that you don't need to worry about that, you don't need to stay separate morally. Why do you just go in among the people?

It doesn't matter so much about your physical behaviour or your lack of control or just sexual immorality. So long as your soul's pure and you keep that separate, then you're okay, just carry on living like that.

[11:29] If it means bowing down idols, that's fine as well, no problem. Just you keep living, you've got to support your family, keep living, keep working. And that teaching seemed to be tolerated and accepted within the congregation.

So there was false prophecy, false teaching that was causing the congregation to struggle and to have tension within it.

It's interesting, isn't it? That for us seems quite, it seems a fairly radical drifting from the truth, doesn't it?

In terms of accepted teaching, that your morality doesn't matter a hoot and it doesn't matter that Jesus is your Lord and it doesn't matter that you don't worship idols or put other things first. You would regard that as fairly, fairly deep-seated drifting from the myelin, from the truth. Yet remember, God says, I know your deeds, I know your love and your faith, your service and your perseverance that you're doing more than you did at first.

[12:36] That's interesting. We would maybe just ditch this church. Well, start again, this church has completely lost it. Jesus wants to expose what's happening, this early, this young church.

And he wants to put it on the right path and he wants to bring it back to usefulness again. He recognizes the great danger of compromise and of toleration of things that he hates, things that he knows are damaging to our humanity, damaging to our thinking and damaging to our life.

And so within that, there's interesting challenges for ourselves with respect to asking how we live as Christians in the world, but also how we live within the church.

Because there's a problem, wasn't it, in both ways. There's a problem for the way the Christians went out and did their business and interacted with the world and how they lived separately, or not as the case may be.

And also there's a problem within the church and that they were tolerating teaching that allowed that to happen. And so there's a challenge there that Jesus makes for how we act as Christians in the world and how we act as Christians with one another within the church.

[13:51] How do we live in the world? Hasn't that been the age-old problem? It's how we live as Christians in a world that doesn't believe, in a world that doesn't accept Christ as Lord, that doesn't accept His morality and His ethics and His love and His Lordship and His sovereignty.

So that's a challenge that every one of you will face tomorrow morning when you go into the workplace. How will I live as a Christian? Where do I draw the line? Where do I compromise and not compromise?

How is it that I'm to live? We're free as Christians, but we are free to live without compromising Jesus' Lordship and Jesus' standards in our own life.

And that standard is clear for us in terms of morality, in terms of faithfulness, in terms of sexual purity, in terms of sobriety. All these things are clear for us in terms of loving our neighbour.

All these things are clear. It's how we put them into practice and how we recognise living by His standards on a day-to-day basis. So as you go out into live in the world tomorrow, as you live in the world tomorrow, we recognise that Jesus wants for us no lowering of a standard of personal holiness.

[15:08] He wants us to remain morally, to hold our integrity and to stand and walk a different path.

That will always be the case. There's simply no value in saying if we compromise, then it will give us more opportunity and will be more acceptable.

The Christian walk, having Jesus Christ as Lord of your life is always going to be unacceptable to people who haven't got Jesus Christ as Lord. And if we break the standards of morality in one area, we break them another, we break them another, and there becomes then no difference.

Having Jesus as our Lord makes no difference whatsoever. And it's a bit like the church here, which says, doesn't matter how you live, doesn't matter what you do. Physically how you live and how you deal with your body, as long as somehow someone in here, this invisible soul is pure.

But that's nonsense, isn't it? Because we don't believe in that separation of body and soul. We believe that we're redeemed body and soul, that our redemption is physical and spiritual.

[16:14] It's both, and it relates to our lives and our morality as well. How we live in the world and also how we live in the church, of course, where to be intolerant of teaching or philosophy or thinking that drifts us from God's standard and from God's clear revealed will for us.

We're bought with a price. Jesus shed his blood so that we could be free. And we come under his Lordship, we are his treasured possession.

We're a people under authority, under the authority of the living God of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we're not really free to tolerate in our fellowship rubbish teaching and teaching that drifts us from the ethos and the standard and the character and the purity of the living God.

And that's important for us because as we saw this morning, he's the Holy God. He's the God who's redeemed redemption because he's holy, because we're not.

But in Christ we can move with the Holy Spirit in us towards that lifestyle and be covered in his righteousness. We're all a people under his authority.

[17:39] And we live in the church like that, accountable to one another, looking out for one another, rebuking one another in love like a family, caring for.

You know the hardest things to say in a family are when we have to call each other up short because there's something that's happening in the life of the family that's destructive and damaging and it needs to be addressed.

The same is true in the church, much easier to stick our head in the sand, isn't it? Or just to complain or moan about things and move on or accept a lowering of standards that Christ wants us to recognise that we are to be turning from that.

It's interesting actually, I think it's, I find it interesting that so many of these churches that Christ speaks about and throughout the New Testament, the letters New Testament, with all the different issues and problems they had, it seems to be that God brings up again and again sexual immorality.

That's one of the big issues within the church. Now, I don't think that's because there was no other issues, but I think that interestingly it's because it highlights, or it's a reflection of drifting away from the nature and the character of faith and of God, which is about, at one level anyway spiritually, faithfulness.

[19:14] So faithfulness to God. And that will be reflected as Christians in that we show faithfulness and grace in our relationship, in our marriage, and that sexual immorality is a movement away from that model which Christ himself uses as a model for his love for the church, marriage, husband and wife, and the church being the bride of Christ.

But also generally the sexual immorality that was engaged in was a reflection of a huge self-indulgence. It was about really self-indulgence and self-satisfaction, and it's the antithesis of self-sacrificing love that Christianity embodies and highlights.

And so the kind of orgiastic lifestyle of the societies in the early church was a very self-indulgent and self-satisfying and self-gratifying lifestyle, which I'm just getting what I want involved in that lifestyle.

And so being a Christian in that was very, was the antithesis, it was very different, in that we reflect the self-control of the spirit and that we reflect a respect and a love for the opposite sex, in that we reflect faithfulness in marriage.

And these are all significant as they reflect understanding the Lordship of Christ and understanding how he has made us.

[20 : 54] So we see within the church a certain attitude that Christ wants to imbibe, and also within the world as Christians. And within it all there's that same ongoing desire that the people change and repent.

In other words, turn back to him. He is exposing this, his x-ray eyes are exposing the damage, and he wants them to turn, he wants Jezebel and her followers to turn, to teach scripture and to teach, reflecting his character as it is given to us, because he loves and he wants people to not be corrupting and damaging and self-centered in their thinking.

That so much, isn't it, has been a message for us over these last weeks, that we are a people turning to God, turning every day to God, turning refreshed to God, turning for renewed repentance, turning as his blazing eyes of love expose the damage of our hearts and the need for healing, we turn to him and receive his healing.

He wants us to be renewed and refreshed. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she's unwilling. God is this compassionate, loving heart, giving every opportunity, giving space, giving warning and warning and warning of a better way, a stronger way, a wholesome way.

He uses his word, he uses friends, he uses preaching, he uses providence. Sometimes we just close our ears. We are not willing to repent.

[22 : 47] It's like this morning, is he can the same kind of message you're at? This is the path, walk in it. No, we don't want to walk in this path. This is the way, walk in it. We don't want that way. You listen to the voice.

No, we're not hearing what you're saying. And the challenge is always for us to be responsive to the ongoing word of the living God. So we see not only his words of encouragement and his eyes of rebuke, but in many ways we see also the feet of judgment that comes from God on those who doggedly refused to turn back to him and who deliberately and consciously taught this damaging false theology that was in danger of compromising the church and destroying the glory of God in that place.

He speaks about the one whose feet in verse 18 are like burnished bronze. It's very much just a picture as it goes on at the end, section of the passage speaking about the fact that this is the living God, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, but also the judge and the judge who ultimately deals with sin because sin is cancerous and deadly and destructive and satanic in its source.

And so he will eventually destroy it entirely. And he says that there's implications for her.

There's implications for her children. I think that means her followers, those who espouse her teaching and that there would be judgment spiritually on them.

[24 : 45] I think the reminder too is again not only the danger of having high-handed attitude towards God or a careless attitude towards sin and an unwillingness to turn to him and to listen to him, but also the reality of the effect it has on others.

This woman obviously had followers, people who said, whoa, that's a great idea, we can be Christians, we can carry on just living any old way and engaging the orgies that are going on and that's fine, we're still forgiving, that's superb.

And that sin that ripples and it has children and grandchildren, it affects then the whole ethos and the effectiveness and the power and the purity and the love of the church.

We recognize too that Jesus Christ is not a kind of weak and memed and toothless Savior, but there's that terrible picture of the wrath of the Lamb that's given to us in Revelation that ultimately He can't be abused or ignored or treated like dirt.

He can't be trampled on because He's gentle, Jesus making mild, but He is sovereign and holy and pure and His arms are spread out on the cross for our sins and these sins cost Him so greatly, but there will be a price to pay for those who choose to just reject and ignore and forget that reality.

[26 : 23] But His judgment here, His warning here has that purpose, to bring this church back and also to bring us back in our lives.

He stops us short. He wants this church to be at the crossroads again, doesn't he? He wants them to think and He also wants us constantly as we read His Word and that's why we read His Word

because constantly it is exposing what needs to be changed and redeemed and cleansed from our lives and to draw us back to Himself.

We recognize that and seek to follow Him. So we see His feet of judgment and also we see finally and briefly that His will for us as Christians and as a church is to overcome, to Him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations.

It's pretty un-dramatic really and it's not very exciting, but that's God's will for us. He wants us to persevere as Christians. Keep on going.

Keep on, keep on going. That's what He wants us to do. The temptation is to give up. The temptation is to compromise. The temptation is to say it's too hard to be a Christian, too difficult to maintain sexual purity, it's too difficult not to give in to the idolatry of the age, whatever that might happen to be in our lives.

[27 : 59] It's too difficult because no one believes and Jesus says, hold on. Hold on to what you have. Hold on to Jesus' nose and understands.

We're not going to skip our way to heaven. We're not going to be picking daisies along the road because it's not like that. We might be picking daisies when we get to heaven, but it's a struggle and He knows that we have to hold on and we need to overcome and we need to persevere and each day you get up, you need to decide, with God's grace I'm going to carry on and persevere as a Christian today.

I'm not going to give up. I'm not going to listen to the evil ones whispers. I'm going to carry on and overcome. That is what the Lord wants us to do. He says, I'm not going to impose any other burden on you.

In the light of all the immorality that was in that church, He doesn't want to make another ten laws about where you go and how you spend your time and what clubs you go to and what clubs you don't go to and what you drink and how much you drink and all.

He doesn't make all these rules which can potentially become legalistic. He says, I'm not going to impose any other burden on you other than the burden of grace and the burden of obedience to who I am and the law of love to me and to your neighbour.

[29 : 19] That is the core of the Christian message. Not going to have any other burden. The Word of God is there. The principles of Christ are clear. Go by the book. Go by His standards.

Know these standards. Walk by them. Overcome living that way. It's difficult. You're going to be swimming against the tide, but you have the power of the Holy Spirit in you.

You get the grace of God. And as you do, you will claim the inheritance that is part of being Christ's, which is that we will share in Christ's glory at the end as He has authority over the nation.

So we will share in that judgment and share in the glory that goes with it. We rejoice in that future.

We don't understand it necessarily.

We don't know exactly what it will entail, but we know that we will be drawn into closer fellowship and closer walk, and we will receive the inheritance of those who believe by faith.

[30 : 29] And He asks us by His grace to overcome. And we don't. It's not a human thing that He's just asking us to have the stiff upper lip or to doggedly do it ourselves.

He says, you know, what I've started, I'll finish. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. Look to Him. Keep on looking to Jesus Christ.

Listen to what He says. Listen to His letters. Get to know Him better. Understand the challenge of purity in a society that has no interest whatsoever in that standard today.

We'll laugh and mock and to ride it entirely out of hand. If you're listening, if you're watching Question Time on Thursday night, you'll know exactly what I mean when the questions of the sexualisation of young children was being discussed.

The whole idea of any kind of moral structure that had any kind of Christian ethos was utterly derided and mocked.

[31 : 42] And so it is difficult to humbly live Christ's way today. But that's what He asks us to do. And He asks us to love, to have faith, to serve and to persevere.

These are the good things. And it's all clear for us, made by His grace we'd be able to do that. Let's bow our heads briefly and pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You that Your Word is unchanging because we recognise that our needs, our hearts are unchanging and the people of Thyatira are no different from ourselves really.

And they may express their humanity and their fallenness in different ways. And sometimes we might think ourselves to be superior.

But we know that in our hearts there is the seed of every rebellious thought act indeed. And we know that we need Christ's grace and His forgiveness and His power to change us, to mould us and to help us to be presented before Him.

We thank You for Jesus, for the cross of Calvary where He paid the price for all our sins, for our thoughts and our rebellions and our giving in to temptation and our lusts and purities and greed and selfishness and lovelessness, coldness, hardness.

[33 : 13] He took that all and paid the price so that we might be forgiven and renewed. That become an ever-increasing reality to us, more powerful and more cleansing than anything that we can ever dream of.

And help us to learn from Your Word and learn from the mistakes of these early churches. We shudder sometimes to think what kind of letter Jesus would write about us as a church.

What He would expose that we may be unaware of and the things that we think are secret to ourselves. And so we thank You that these churches, in a sense, have been willing to be exposed and to be made available to us as many of the Bible characters would also be exposed and their hearts laid bare in ways that we have never had happen to us.

We thank You for what we've learned from them and what the Holy Spirit teaches us from that. So bless as we pray in a bless our parting song of praise, maybe to Your glory we ask.

Bless as in this working week that we will enter tomorrow. And help us to be Your people, to be filled with Your Spirit, to be pure, to be gentle and respectful and kind and humble.

[34 : 46] And to witness for You and to turn to You daily, we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.